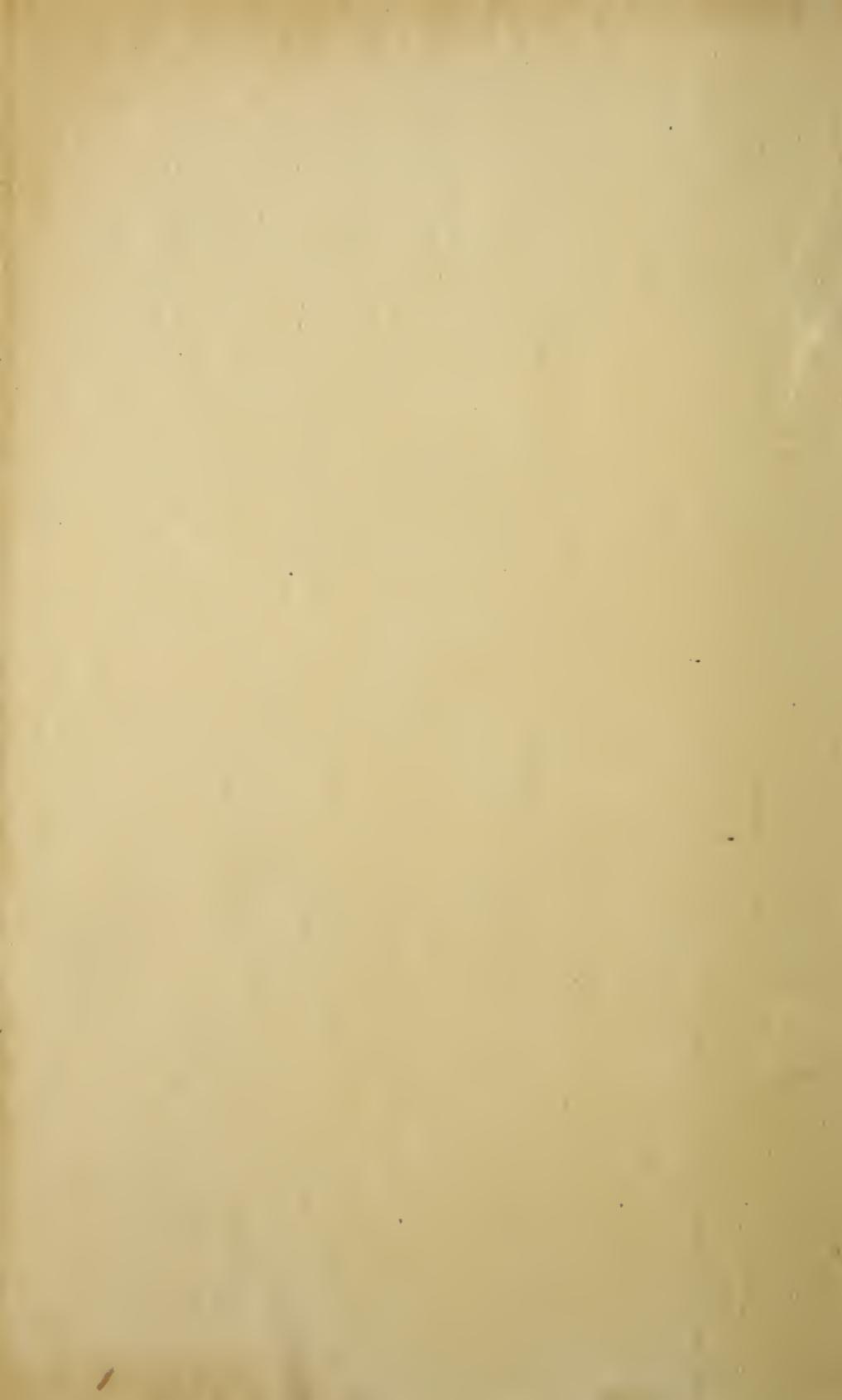
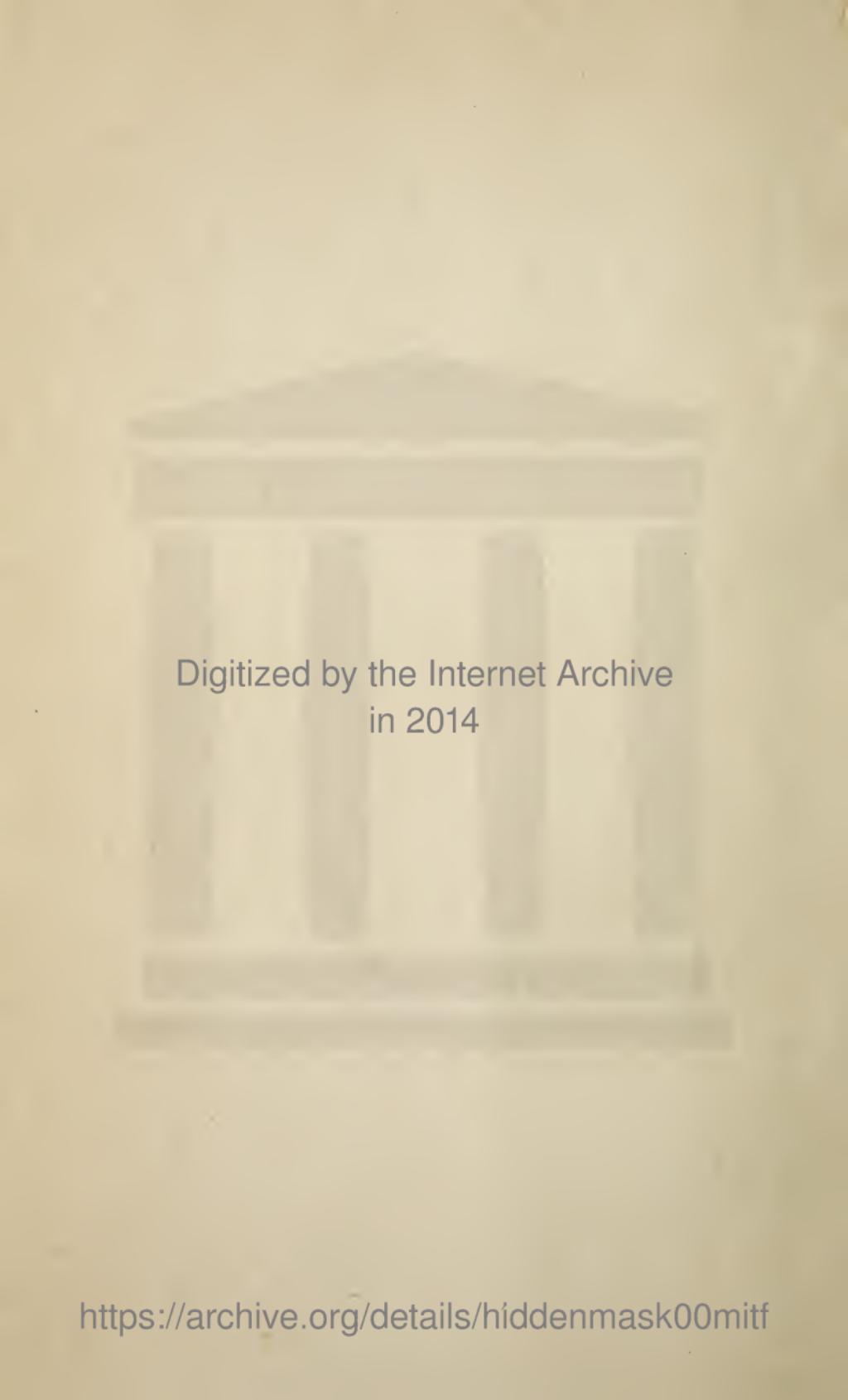


THE HIDDEN
MASK
C. GUISE MITFORD



1934

A very faint, light gray watermark is visible in the background, showing the interior of the Egyptian Hall at the British Museum. The hall features a high ceiling with a decorative cornice, and several large, fluted columns supporting the structure. The watermark is out of focus and serves as a subtle background for the text.

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THE HIDDEN MASK

THE AUTHOR OF
"THE HIDDEN MASK"

"Mr C. Guise Mitford writes with considerable skill and possesses conspicuous power in the contrivance of a plot."—*Pall Mall Gazette*.

"Mr C. Guise Mitford is a consummate literary artist."—*Dundee Advertiser*.

His Novels are:—

THE SPELL OF THE SNOW
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IZELLE OF THE DUNES
THE PAXTON PLOT
LOVE IN LILAC-LAND
THE WOOING OF MARTHA
AND
THE HIDDEN MASK

THE HIDDEN MASK

BY

C. GUISE MITFORD

Author of

"The Paxton Plot," "His Dainty Whim," "Izelle of the Dunes,"

"The Spell of the Snow," "Love in Lilac-Land,"

"The Wooing of Martha"

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THE HIDDEN MASK

CHAPTER I

LAWRENCE CLAYTON, barrister-at-law, came slowly down the narrow staircase which led from his chambers in the Temple to the Court which was hidden away not one hundred yards from the busy traffic of Fleet Street. It was late in the evening of a raw November day, and the air was heavy with a thickening fog which made the hurrying figures of pedestrians appear ghost-like in the uncertain light. With quick steps he turned westward towards the Strand, with his head sunk low upon his chest and his hands deep in his pockets. He did not stop till he reached the doors of Gatti's Restaurant, nearly opposite Charing Cross Station. Then, after a moment of hesitation, he passed into the well-lighted rooms, which were already filled with a cosmopolitan crowd.

As he sank back upon the cushioned seat, he drew a letter from his pocket, and, having ordered a simple meal, he thoughtfully perused the closely written pages in front of him. They were from the woman he loved, and had only reached him that day, but he could not yet realize the import of the

message they conveyed. The letter told him, in words that were almost brutal in their frankness, that their marriage was impossible. No reason was given, but the decision was unalterable. She asked him to call at her father's house in Berkeley Square that evening at nine o'clock, when she would be alone, and able to explain what she could not put upon paper.

Having returned the letter to his pocket, Clayton stared moodily at the gay scene around him. The food and drink upon the table remained for a long time unnoticed. He was trying to understand the tragedy which a few lines from a woman can force upon the life of a man. While he thus sat there, it was possible to form some idea of the personality of this man who plays so important a part in the remarkable story which fills these pages. In age he was still upon the right side of forty years, well built and muscular, and with clear cut features which commanded both confidence and respect. His lips were set in a thin red line above the strong chin. He wore his hair rather longer than most men, upon a well shaped head, and his eyes carried a singularly friendly expression, in spite of the depressed mood through which he was passing. Lawrence Clayton seldom smiled, but when he did so few people would have denied that he was an exceedingly attractive man. It was only by a careful examination of the clothes he wore that a stranger would have guessed the secret of his life, which he strove so bravely to hide. He was poor—miserably poor—and he cursed his poverty as ardently as he cherished those great ambitions

which had filled the dreams of his youth and early manhood.

It was only upon rare occasions that he allowed himself the luxury of a dinner outside his own rooms. As a rule, that meal was a very simple affair, and did not tax the culinary efforts of his housekeeper half as much as it taxed his own digestion. But on this night he felt thoroughly downcast. A long spell of slack business had damped his spirits, and he had fought bravely against a succession of disappointments which could not fail to leave their effect upon a man of so sensitive a temperament, and with such highly strung nerves. Then had come the letter from the woman he loved, and it seemed to burn deep into his flesh as it lay in his pocket. He had read it many times, always seeking some hidden meaning between the lines that covered the pages of delicately-scented paper, yet ever finding that one bald, naked fact confronted him.

Verna Rossitter—the only woman he had ever desired as a wife—had declared that their union was impossible.

Apart from her beauty and great prospects, he loved her. The acquaintance had quickly deepened into a wider friendship, and for some time past he had realized that life without her would not be worth the living. He had whispered this truth into her ear, and the love-light in her eyes had given him the answer he longed for. Since that time, their relations had been those of lovers, though he was still waiting for the luck which never came to him, before he spoke to her father.

An accident had brought him and Myles Rossitter—the great South African millionaire—together. The elder man had slipped upon the pavement of the street, and Clayton—who was just behind him—had come forward with ready help, and driven him home to his stately mansion in Berkeley Square. The result of the fall had occasioned nothing worse than a sprained ankle, but the acquaintance so casually made, brought Clayton several invitations to Myles Rossitter's house, and in this way he had seen much of his host's only child. He had loved her from the first moment when they met. Her name was ever upon his lips, her voice echoing in his ear. Her beauty and charm were never absent from his memory, and he had lately gloried in the knowledge that his affection for her was reciprocated. With such an inspiration to urge him forward, he had worked harder than ever. He had a stronger incentive to struggle against the bad luck which pursued him. It was no longer only for himself that he laboured. It was for Verna. Then had come the letter which now lay in his pocket.

Having concluded his dinner, he glanced at his watch and found that it was already past eight o'clock. He was surprised to find he had been sitting so long in thought. The meal he had just finished had done nothing to cheer his spirits. He felt very lonely and depressed—dissatisfied with everything in life and especially with himself. He paid his bill and hurriedly left the brilliantly lighted rooms. The fog in the street had thickened, and it was with difficulty that he made his way among the people who thronged the pavement. Fortunately,

at that moment a taxi-cab stopped beside him, and a couple of men got out of it. Clayton did not notice them, but immediately entered the vacant cab, telling the man to drive to Berkeley Square.

As he sank back in the darkness, the car started, and a cold blast of damp air came to his face from the open window. He hastily closed it, and, having done so, his hand suddenly rested upon a small parcel on the seat beside him. He lifted it, and examined it as carefully as was possible in the gloom. Then he decided to wait till he returned to his rooms, and put it in the inner pocket of his coat. He stared through the window at the dim, yellow picture through which he was passing, and wondered what would be the result of his coming interview with Verna Rossitter that night. As the cab turned into Piccadilly, he decided to walk the rest of the way. It was already blocked among many other vehicles, and further progress seemed impossible for some time to come. He put his head out of the window and called to the driver.

"I will get out here," he said, as he opened the door. "It is quicker work to walk than drive on a night like this."

"You are right, sir," the man answered, as he pocketed his fare. "There ain't much good driving through this 'ere fog if you are pressed for time. Thank you, sir."

With much difficulty, and no little risk, Clayton found his way to the north side of the street, and walked on to his destination. By this time, the fog was so dense that he could see nothing through the opaque yellow cloud that enveloped him on every

side. But he well knew the direction he was taking and, after some delay, found himself upon the steps outside the house of the great financier.

"Is Miss Rossitter at home?" he asked of the footman who opened the door.

The man hesitated.

"Miss Rossitter is in, sir," he replied, "but I do not know if she can see you."

"Why not?" Clayton asked impatiently. "She is expecting me, so please take my card in to her at once."

The man took the card, and disappeared. Presently he returned, followed by a woman who was evidently one of the upper servants in the house.

"Miss Rossitter is very sorry, sir," she said, as she came towards Clayton. "She is unable to see you, as she is suffering from a bad headache. She dined in her room this evening, sir, and has now gone to bed."

"I am grieved to hear that," Clayton said. "Will you see that she gets my card, and tell her that I hope she will be quite well again in the morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is Mr Rossitter at home?"

"No, sir," the man answered. "Mr Rossitter dined out this evening, and has not yet returned."

Clayton drew the folds of his scarf closer round his throat as he walked away from the door. The fog clung round him as he crossed the road, to where he could gaze up at the lighted windows of the house he had just visited. He no longer possessed either the will or the strength to continue the unequal

struggle against a cruel fate. At that moment, his only thought was to be near to the woman he loved, unseen and maybe unthought of. She had failed him, and at the time when he most needed the inspiration of her love. The manner of both the servants he had just seen gave him the impression that the message they conveyed from their mistress was not strictly in accordance with facts. He felt that, had Verna Rossitter wished to keep her self-made appointment with him, she was quite capable of doing so. So he would just wish her "good-bye" in silence, and then go away. It did not much matter what happened to him afterwards. Under the circumstances, it was impossible for him to visit her home again, and it was not likely that he would meet her in the very narrow circle of society in which he moved.

He had walked round the Square more than once, always pausing in front of the home where lived the woman who filled his thoughts. The lines upon his face had become more deep. The hungry look in his eyes more set. He could not see the houses in front of him, for the fog had become so thick that it was with difficulty that he felt his way along the railings that bounded the grounds of the Square. For the last time he halted, and gazed up in the direction of the mansion where Verna lived, and his lips moved to speak their words of farewell. Then he suddenly felt a soft touch upon his arm.

Looking down, he saw the dim outline of a distorted human shape beside him. The tiny figure was that of a man, but the fog which enveloped it gave him the grotesque contour of a large monkey.

As he stooped, he heard a low voice whisper into his ear. It was not like the voice of any man he had ever heard speak.

“ You are Mr Lawrence Clayton ? ”

“ Yes,” Clayton replied. “ That is my name, but I should like to know how you got hold of it. Who are you, and what the devil do you want with me ? ”

He was obliged to bend lower to hear the answer from the strange figure beside him. He could not see the face, but the grip of the fingers tightened unpleasantly upon his arm.

“ If you are looking out for a good job which will put money in your pocket, I may be able to help you in the way of getting one,” the voice said huskily. “ You are watching that house opposite to us, the house of Myles Rossitter. I have been doing the same thing, so I conclude there must be some common bond of sympathy between us.” The voice hesitated for a moment, and the small figure pressed closer to Clayton’s side. An ungloved hand—large out of all proportion to the size of its owner—felt for Clayton’s palm, and pressed something into it. “ That is my name and address. I am generally at home during the morning. I hope we may come to an arrangement which will be to our mutual advantage.”

Clayton raised the slip of cardboard, and tried to discern what was printed upon it, but, though he stood close to a lamp, it was impossible to decipher the words.

Once more he repeated his former question. This time his voice showed more interest than irritation in its tone.

"Who are you, and what the devil do you want with me?"

But, as he lowered his gaze from the card in his hand to the place where his weird companion had stood, he saw that he was alone.

Half-an-hour later, when he emerged into Piccadilly, Clayton noticed that the fog was lifting. After the gloom of the Square he had left behind him, he experienced no difficulty in finding the way back to his rooms. The dull glare of the electric lamps sifted heavily through the yellow atmosphere, and it was with a sigh of relief that he reached the entrance to the building where his chambers were situated. As he approached his landing, he was surprised to see a thin streak of light coming from under the door. He paused with an exclamation of astonishment, for he had left his rooms in darkness, and he never allowed anybody to use them during his absence. Someone must have entered his apartments while he was away. It was possible that the intruder was still there. He stepped softly towards the door, and stooped till his ear was level with the keyhole. Not a sound came from within, and a chilly feeling crept down his spine as he stood there listening for—he knew not what.

Then he straightened himself, while his fingers felt for the handle of the door. To his surprise, he found that he had forgotten to lock it, and it opened easily to his pressure. He crossed the threshold into the lighted room, and then—with a gasp of horror—he staggered backwards.

Stretched upon the floor at his feet lay the body of a man, and the first glance showed that he was dead.

This was the first occasion upon which Lawrence Clayton had found himself alone in the presence of death, and, as he stooped over the prostrate body, he was conscious of only two sensations—horror and a great fear. Horror at this sudden tragedy which had overtaken the stranger in front of him, fear as he realized that this murder—if murder it was—had been committed in his rooms. With trembling hands he struck a match, and held it to the dead man's lips. The thin flame moved steadily upwards, without a flicker to either side, and Clayton felt a nausea rise in his throat as he stared down at the open, glazed eyes of the corpse upon the floor. For some minutes he stood there, with every nerve tight strung, and with his hands clasped at his sides. Then he realized that the sensation of fear was mastering his feeling of horror, for he heard the sound of a soft, shuffling step approaching his room through the darkness of the landing outside, and remembered that he had left the door open behind him. With an effort he drew himself erect, and turned round—and saw that he was not alone.

CHAPTER II

As his eyes fell upon the figure in the doorway, he started back with an exclamation of surprise and alarm. For a few moments he was uncertain whether he was looking at some horrible distortion of a human form or that of a large ape. The creature was watching him with a calm, unblinking stare in its pale grey eyes, and showed no inclination to enter the room. In height it could not have measured more than four feet, and it wore a loose, ill-fitting suit of coarse material which was many sizes too large for it. The face certainly appeared to be a human one, so far as the features could be observed, but the cheeks, chin, and mouth were so heavily covered with hair, that it was impossible to see behind the thick growth, while upon its head it carried a dark slouch hat. As Clayton felt for the side of the table, he heard a low, soft voice addressing him, and he knew that the *thing* was human.

“Is he dead?”

“Yes.” Clayton replied mechanically, and without moving his eyes from those of the man who faced him. “He is dead.”

“Is it a case of suicide—or murder?” the voice continued in an expressionless tone. “If the latter, who is the assassin?”

The eyes of the hideous figure were still fixed upon Clayton's face. There was a curious lack of expression in them, and the lips hardly moved as they put the question.

"Good God!" Clayton gasped. "How can I tell? The man is as much a stranger to me as—as you are. I only returned here a few minutes ago, and I found him lying dead upon the floor, just as you see him now."

"We are not quite strangers," said the voice from the doorway. "I think we have met before."

Clayton stamped his foot upon the floor. The first horror of the situation was passing from him, and he was beginning to recover his self-control.

"I have never seen you in my life," he said angrily. "Had I done so, it is not likely I should have forgotten the occasion."

"I think we met about an hour ago, in front of Myles Rossitter's house in Berkeley Square. If you feel in the pocket of your coat, you will find my card—that is, if you have have not already thrown it away."

Then Clayton remembered his strange interview with the unknown person that evening in the fog, and repeated the questions he had already put to him.

"Who are you, and what the devil do you want?"

The dwarf hesitated, but only for an instant.

"Your first question is answered by the card in your pocket, if you care to take the trouble to look at it. Your second question can be answered in one word. What *you* want is—myself."

"You!"

As the word escaped Clayton's lips he moved a step further backward with a gesture of loathing, raising his hand before his face as though to hide the picture of the hideous creature which confronted him.

"Yes. Me," the dwarf said. "I am the only living person who can prove that you did not commit this crime yourself." He took a slow, shuffling step forward, and looked round the apartment. "By the way, did you say that these chambers belong to you?"

"Yes, I did," Clayton replied desperately. "As I pay the rent for them, I conclude I can call them mine. And that fact reminds me that I am not in the habit of entertaining strangers uninvited—unless they come for professional advice or assistance."

"Like that dead man upon the floor?" the dwarf asked slowly.

"I have already told you that he is unknown to me," Clayton said furiously. "I know as much about his death and how he came here as the man in the moon." He stepped over the body as he spoke, and advanced towards the door. "I am now going to report this matter to the police so, if you have sufficiently satisfied your curiosity, I will ask you to return to where you came from. As I have got your address, it will be easy for me to find you if—and when—I desire your *assistance*."

The last word was spoken in a voice which accentuated the sneer it was intended to convey. But the dwarf coolly shuffled forward towards the body upon the ground, and stooped to close the open eyes with a hand which appeared to Clayton

more like the back of a toad than any part of a human body. It was large, and heavily creased with rolls of loose skin.

"I am going to remain where I am for the present," he said.

"You are going to do nothing of the sort," Clayton replied. "I shall not leave these rooms till I have seen you safely out of the building. If necessary, I will carry you downstairs myself."

The dwarf raised himself to the full height of his tiny stature, and then moved awkwardly across the room to the lowest of the easy chairs, upon which he sat, with his legs coiled under him in a position which made him appear even smaller than before.

"Look here, Mr Clayton," he said. "Let us understand each other in this matter once and for all. You may not like my appearance, nor my method of introducing myself to your notice, but that is more my misfortune than my fault. I will be perfectly candid with you, and I hope you will be equally so with me. At the present time I can prove myself to be a very good friend to you. I can also be a dangerous enemy." He paused for a moment. "It remains with you to decide which rôle I am to adopt."

Clayton remained speechless at the cool impudence of this strange person. His gaze wandered from the hairy, creased face of the dwarf upon the chair, to the waxen features of the dead man upon the floor, and it was some time before he could sufficiently command his voice to answer the implied question which had been put to him.

"This is evidently a case of blackmail," he said,

"and it can be better dealt with by the police than by myself. Are you going to leave these rooms, or do you wish me to throw you out?"

The little man cleared his throat, and lifted one horrid hand with a gesture of remonstrance.

"Not so fast," he said, "not quite so fast. Before you do anything so prejudicial to your own interests as to forcibly eject me, I want an answer to my question. Am I to be your friend or your foe? If the latter, then I am prepared to swear in any court of law that I saw you murder that man. I could even prove, to the satisfaction of any jury, how you committed the crime." The steely eyes of the dwarf watched Clayton narrowly, as he passed one hand across his hairy mouth. "On the contrary, if you are willing to accept my friendship, I will confidently guarantee to you a reward which is at present far beyond your reach."

"I want neither your friendship nor your enmity," Clayton replied doggedly. "You have thrust your acquaintance upon me unsolicited and undesired, and now you threaten me." He began to pace the little room with hurried, uneven steps. He almost tripped over the body of the dead man who lay there. With a quick turn he came to the chair where the dwarf sat, and leaned over him with a dangerous light in his eyes. "Now, for the last time," he said huskily, "are you going to leave my rooms quietly or do you wish me to use force? You have trifled with me long enough and—good God!—there is that man lying there dead! Now then—are you going?"

He would have seized the shrivelled figure, but

for the sickening feeling of repugnance he felt for touching that distorted body. The heavy head which was so near to his own, suddenly raised itself upon the square shoulders, and the steely grey eyes looked into his own with a glance which was both malignant and cruel. They were like the eyes of a hungry animal stealthily watching its prey.

"The reward I am prepared to offer you is sufficient to justify your choice of my alternatives."

The sound of that voice was more like a croak than the expression of any human feeling.

"Damn you!" Clayton said furiously. "And what is the reward you offer me?"

"Verna Rossiter—*for your wife*."

Had a bombshell suddenly exploded in the room, the effect upon Clayton could not have been more disturbing. He leaned forward, over the coiled up figure of the dwarf, which rested so composedly upon the chair, with a muttered oath.

"My God!" he gasped, "are you man or devil?"

"I am both," the dwarf answered coolly. "It depends upon which way you choose to take me."

"What is Verna Rossiter to me?"

"She is the woman you love."

"Yes. And—"

"And she is the woman who will be your wife, if—if you accept me as your friend."

"And if I refuse?"

The crumpled figure upon the chair squirmed gently. With difficulty he appeared to raise his shoulders.

"You will swing for the murder of that man upon the floor."

Clayton turned away, and resumed his walk up and down the room, deep in thought. He was trying to determine in his mind where lay his greatest danger. Was it with the silent corpse beside which he trod, or was it with the little huddled up bundle of human deformity who sat coiled up upon the chair, and whose eyes he felt were watching him with their cold, unblinking stare?

“The reward you offer me is certainly a generous one,” he said presently, and he did not try to conceal the sarcasm in his voice. “If I accept your offer of friendship what guarantee have I that you will fulfil your promise?”

“I ask for no guarantee of honour on your part, so why should you expect one from me?” the dwarf answered. “You have everything to gain—I have nothing to lose. But I can promise you this. If you decide to accept me as your friend, Verna Rossitter will be your wife.”

The little figure seemed to suddenly contract till it appeared to be nothing more than a mere bundle of clothes.

Clayton hesitated.

“And what are your conditions?” he asked. “Of course, you are not an entirely disinterested party to such an agreement.”

The hairy head protruded itself from under the heavy coat which hung so limp about its body, and the dull eyes looked up towards where Clayton stood.

“You have my name and address upon the card in your pocket,” the dwarf said sleepily. “We will meet again later in the day, for it is already past

midnight. If you insist upon acquainting the police with regard to this unfortunate affair, of course I have no power to prevent you. But, with your permission, I shall stop here till you return. I think this will be the safest thing to do—for both of us. The police will be glad to avail themselves of the evidence of an eye witness, should such evidence be desired—or offered."

"What is your reason for wishing to stay here?" Clayton asked. "Why should you be mixed up with this matter at all?"

"I am tired—and I want to go to sleep."

As he spoke, the dwarf's head sank slowly back upon the cushion behind him, and his lids fell drowsily over his eyes.

Clayton watched him in silence, noting the gradual relaxation of the muscles and the loosening of the fingers tight drawn against the fleshy palms. The heavy chest moved slowly up and down with regular breathing, and to all appearances the dwarf was fast asleep.

More than once did Clayton pace up and down the narrow limits of the little room, tortured with uncertainty as to what was the best course he should adopt. Should he leave his unwelcome visitor asleep upon the chair, while he hurried to the nearest police station, or should he carry him downstairs and deposit him in the court outside? Either alternative was equally repugnant to him. But as his gaze rested upon the white face of the dead man upon the floor, he felt that too much time had already been wasted before bringing the fact of the murder before the proper authorities. He decided

to risk leaving the dwarf where he was during the short time he would be absent from the room. The little man could not escape if the door was locked, and if he carried him downstairs he would still be about the premises when the police arrived. Besides, Clayton could not yet guess what game the dwarf was playing. He had already shown a disconcerting knowledge with regard to his private affairs. Yes; the wisest and probably the safest course would be to feign friendship with him, at any rate till he knew exactly what were their relations to each other.

With a quick glance at the sleeping figure on the chair, Clayton passed through the still open doorway and on to the dark landing. Then he softly closed the door behind him and locked it, putting the key in his pocket.

As the sound of his retreating steps grew faint, the eyes of the dwarf slowly opened. For a moment he looked round the room with a keen, critical glance. Then he slid from the chair and shuffled towards the door.

“Locked! Curse him!” he muttered. “Still there is time to do what is necessary before he comes back. I think he will do for the job. He has more nerve than I gave him credit for.”

The next moment, the little figure was crouching over the body of the dead man, and his hands were feeling with feverish haste in all the pockets of the clothes he wore. A furious oath burst from his lips when at last he struggled to his feet.

“Damn him!” he panted. “*The diamonds are gone.*”

CHAPTER III

LIKE a man in a dream, Clayton hurried along the now silent and deserted streets. The fog had risen, and the pale crescent of a young moon shed a dim light from above him. It was that hour of the early morning when the great city is most silent. Only late roysterers were finding their ways home, and the chief signs of life and movement came from dusky figures crouching in restless sleep upon dark steps—from forms that hovered stealthily over dustbins in search of stray fragments of food—and prowling cats that moved cautiously from shadow to shadow.

On his arrival at the police station, Clayton was kept waiting some time while the Inspector on duty dealt with various cases of drunkenness and brawling which had recently been brought in. When at last he found himself standing close to the official desk, with the keen-eyed officer regarding him—(he thought with suspicion in his eyes)—the sense of unreality grew and strengthened within him. Was he really awake, or was this some horrible dream?

Clayton reported his case as briefly as possible, and the officer made several notes in the open book upon the desk in front of him. No questions were asked till he had finished his statement, and then there came a long pause, during which the Inspector watched him thoughtfully.

"You say that the body of a dead man is now lying in your chambers?" he asked presently, taking up the pen which he had just laid upon the desk.

"Yes."

"And you have left the man whom you call the dwarf asleep upon a chair in the same room?"

"Yes."

"You believe that the dead man is a stranger to you?"

"I am sure he is so."

"And the dwarf?"

Clayton tapped his foot impatiently upon the floor.

"I have already told you that the first time I met him was last night in Berkeley Square. He must have followed me back to my home, and joined me only a few moments after I found the body upon the floor."

"What opinion have you formed—if any—of this dwarf?"

Clayton hesitated.

"His appearance is hardly human, but his manner is that of—of—"

"Of what?"

"Of the very devil himself."

"Are you aware of any reason—private or otherwise—why he should have forced his acquaintance upon you?"

"There is none that I know of. I think it must be a case of mistaken identity. I can imagine no other excuse for his behaviour."

The Inspector nibbled the end of his pen for a few moments in silence.

"Are you prepared to swear that the information you have just given me is all you know about this affair?" he asked presently.

"Certainly," Clayton replied. "That is why I am here. I wish to clear myself as soon as possible of any suggestion of complicity in the crime."

"You are sure the man is dead? He is not in a fit?"

"Whether he is dead or in a fit, is no business of mine," Clayton replied with some asperity. "Personally I believe he is dead, but you can soon certify that point by having the body conveyed here. The fact remains that the man—dead or alive—is lying upon the floor of my room, and I want to get rid of him as quickly as possible."

"Are there any traces of blood about the apartment?"

"There are no traces of anything. There is just the body, and, from the expression upon the face, there does not seem to have been any violence."

"You have no idea how he obtained an entrance to your rooms?"

"No more than you have."

"Did you lock the door when you went out earlier in the evening?"

"I cannot swear to that, but it is my habit to do so."

"And you still maintain that you left this—dwarf asleep upon the chair?"

"Certainly."

"If the facts are as you state," the Inspector said, "you will be required to give evidence at the inquest. What is your full name and address?"

Clayton at once supplied the information. Having entered these details among his other notes, the Inspector touched an electric bell upon the desk, which was immediately answered by a constable.

“Ask Doctor Bransby to come here at once, and return with him yourself.”

“Yes, sir.”

During the next few minutes, the Inspector sat silent, busily reading over the notes he had just entered in his book. Clayton watched him with a vague feeling of wonder and admiration at the cool manner in which he had received notice of the tragedy which had occurred. Then he remembered that this calm, stern looking official was accustomed to being brought into daily contact with all forms of vice and villainy, and this was no new experience to him as it was to himself. Presently the door opened, and the doctor entered, closely followed by the constable who had summoned him.

“This gentleman, Mr—Clayton, has just made a statement to the effect that on returning to his chambers in the Temple a short time ago, he found the body of a man lying there upon the floor. There appears to have been no violence, nor is there any actual proof that the man is dead. Under these circumstances, I will ask him to repeat his information in your presence, after which I think you had better accompany him back to his rooms with this constable. If the man is dead, you will give the necessary instructions. If it is only a faint or a fit, the constable will bring him here to me, so that he may explain his presence in Mr Clayton’s rooms at such a time of night.”

The doctor nodded gravely, and then turned to fix his eyes upon Clayton's face with a keen professional glance.

"Now, sir," the Inspector continued, taking a pen in his hand and turning back a page in his book where the written evidence commenced. "Will you repeat the facts of this case as you have already given them to me? I do not want you to hurry over them, but try to remember if there are any additional details which have not been entered in my report."

Clayton did as he was requested in a slow and deliberate manner. The Inspector made one or two marginal notes in red ink upon the already closely covered pages. The doctor had removed his gaze from the speaker's face, and was staring at a white almanac which hung upon the wall above the fireplace.

"That is the whole story, so far as I can remember it," Clayton said, as he concluded his narrative for the second time. "I am naturally a good deal upset by what has happened, and it is impossible for me to recall to mind every incident that took place. But I shall be glad to accompany you back to my rooms as soon as possible. Perhaps the dwarf whom I left there will be able to amplify what I have already told you."

"In what way could he do so?" the Inspector asked, slightly contracting his forehead as he put the question.

"He can explain his motive for following me back to my chambers, when he found me alone with the body."

There was silence for a few moments. Then the Inspector looked up at Clayton.

"Are you suggesting anything by saying that?"

"Certainly not. I am suggesting nothing. I am merely making a statement."

Presently the doctor spoke for the first time.

"You have given no description of the body," he said. "Did it strike you as being that of a well-to-do man, or that of a person in humble circumstances? Is he old or young? Fair or dark? How was he dressed?"

Clayton passed his hand heavily across his eyes. He still felt dazed, and the sense of unreality was strong upon him. The whole situation was so different to any that had ever entered into his previous life. The white walls around him became faint and indistinct, and even the stern figure of the Inspector appeared to have receded to a long distance off.

"I wish I could tell you more," he said, "both for your sake and for mine." He turned towards the doctor as he spoke. "But surely you will be able to satisfy yourself upon these matters if you come back with me now to my rooms."

"Have you no recollection of what the body looked like?" the Inspector asked curtly. "You have given us a very clear description of the dwarf. Can you not recall any details connected with the corpse?"

"It appeared to be that of a middle-aged man, and he was dressed in decent clothes. I think he was fair in complexion, and had a rough, light coloured moustache. Beyond that, I remember nothing."

"Was he in evening dress?"

"No. At least, not that I could see. He wore a heavy overcoat, which was buttoned high upon his throat, and the collar must have been turned up, or I should have noticed his white tie—had he worn one."

"This is all you can tell us about him?"

"I am afraid it is all."

"Very well. If you will return to your rooms with Dr Bransby and this constable, it is possible they may be able to throw further light upon the matter. You will of course be available, should the police wish to communicate with you?"

"I shall be glad to do anything in my power to help you."

Not long afterwards Clayton and his two companions reached the building in which his rooms were situated. As they turned the corner of the Court, they met a constable on duty, who saluted when he recognized that one of the three figures, whom he had at first regarded with suspicion, was no other than Doctor Bransby from the Police Station. A friendly nod was also exchanged between him and the constable who walked behind Clayton. They entered the narrow doorway, and ascended the dark stairs. Not a word had passed between them since they left the Inspector's room. As they reached the upper landing, Clayton turned back and whispered over his shoulder.

"This is the place. Wait a minute while I unlock the door."

The two men halted behind him, and presently they heard the sound of a key being fitted into its

hole. There came a sharp click, as the lock turned in its socket, and the door was pressed gently open. A soft light spread suddenly into the space where they stood, and the dim figure of Clayton could be seen crossing the threshold. Then he paused, and a loud exclamation of surprise escaped from his lips.

The room was empty.

CHAPTER IV

THE body of the unknown man no longer lay stretched upon the floor. The hideous figure of the dwarf no longer sat coiled asleep upon the chair. Clayton turned to the men who had followed him into the apartment.

"It looks as if I had brought you upon a fool's errand," he said with a dazed laugh, "but I swear that when I left this room a short time ago there was the body of a man here upon the carpet—just where I am standing now, and a dwarf was asleep in the chair yonder. My God! I believe I am going out of my mind!"

Doctor Bransby turned up the light of the lamp upon the table. Then he came to Clayton's side. When he spoke, his voice was rough but not unkind.

"Had you been drinking last night before you returned here?" he asked. "I have no wish to make any suggestion that may be unpleasant to you, but I should like to get to the bottom of this affair."

Clayton sank down into the chair behind him. It was the same one upon which he had left the dwarf asleep. He felt that events were following each other too rapidly, and with too much confusion, for him to properly note their sequence. He shook his head, and looked up at the man who stood above him.

"No," he replied. "I am a very moderate drinker, and last night I had less than usual. If I had been in the condition which you suggest, it is doubtful whether I could have found my way back here, and I should certainly never have got as far as Berkeley Square in the fog." He paused and, leaning back in his chair, closed his eyes tight, so as to recall the scene in that room as when he had last left it. "The extraordinary thing is that I carefully locked the door when I came away, and I know that those two men remained here behind me. One was a dwarf—asleep in this very chair I am now sitting upon. The other man I believe was dead, and he was lying upon the ground."

While he had been speaking, the doctor had let his hand rest upon Clayton's wrist. With a hasty movement he jerked his arm away and rose to his feet.

"There is no good you feeling my pulse, or taking my temperature, or any rot of that kind," he said angrily, "though I have no objection to you doing either if you want to. I am as sane and as sober as you are."

"Have you had any trouble to worry you lately?" the doctor asked, ignoring Clayton's words and manner. "I do not want to force your confidence, but I should like to hear anything of that kind which you are at liberty to tell me."

"Worry!" Clayton said scornfully. "Why, life for men like me is nothing but a succession of worries. All the same, I think I have had more than my fair share."

"In what way?"

"In every way—very little work that pays, and less cash in my pocket than will keep a man's body and soul together. It has been damnable, simply damnable."

"I understand," the doctor said gravely. "You have my sincere sympathy."

"Bother your sympathy," Clayton said ungraciously. "I do not want that. I wish to know what you propose to do in this matter? I have given you all the information I can. Now I must leave it to the police."

Doctor Bransby inclined his head slowly, but his eyes never left the face of the man beside him.

"Quite so," he said. "I fear there is nothing more you can do to help us. We shall have to ferret out the mystery ourselves. By the way, I suppose you have no objection to us looking into your other rooms? It is possible that the body has been removed to one of them."

"I have not the least objection," Clayton replied. "If you will come with me, we will go through them at once."

But the search did not produce any further evidence in support of the strange story which Clayton had communicated to the Inspector, and, after about half an hour of careful investigation, Doctor Bransby took his departure with the constable, who had been a silent observer of the proceedings. Before he did so, however, Clayton took him on one side and whispered into his ear.

"I want a plain answer to a plain question," he said.

"What is your question?"

"Do you believe that what I have told you and the Inspector really happened, or do you think it is a creation of my own brain ? "

Doctor Bransby passed his hand slowly over his heavy moustache before he replied.

"At present I maintain an open mind upon the matter," he answered. "If what you say has really taken place, then it is only reasonable to ask for sufficient proof to establish your case. On the other hand, it is possible that a man of your highly strung nervous temperament may have been subject to some sort of an illusion, which you are convinced in your own mind actually occurred. Again, the whole thing may be nothing more than the after effect of a very vivid dream, which has acted in an unusual manner upon your brain, with a lasting influence over your waking thoughts. I repeat that, at present, I prefer to maintain an open mind. If anything further comes to light which may help to verify the facts you have given to the police, I am sure you will lose no time in acquainting us with them. You must not think me either discourteous or unduly sceptical, if I point out that—so far—there is not one atom of evidence in support of your story, except your word that certain events have happened. If you can establish, even in a small way, any proof of the truth of your assertions, I need hardly say that you will be able to count upon the whole-hearted support and assistance of the police." He turned to leave the room, but, before he did so, he paused and looked curiously at Clayton's face. "My last words to you, Mr Clayton, are those of professional advice, which I hope you

will accept in the spirit with which they are given. You are thoroughly worn out, your nerves are unstrung, and you need a long rest. I hope that, as soon as we have left you, you will go to bed and not leave it till you feel strengthened and refreshed."

As the door closed behind Doctor Bransby, Clayton hurriedly turned the key in the lock with a shiver of horror. He did not want to be again surprised by that horrid figure of the dwarf, with its ghastly imitation of a human shape, and its lustreless eyes, which were always watching his own. In spite of what the doctor had said, he knew that the events of the last few hours had been no distorted creations of his brain. Though he was as yet unable to account for the extraordinary disappearance of the corpse from his room, he knew perfectly well that he had found it and left it there. Apart from the fact that the door had been locked, and the key in his pocket, he felt confident that the dwarf could not have lifted the weight of a dead man and removed it elsewhere. Thus he must have had an accomplice. Who was that accomplice, and where had he secreted the body? From the time when the dwarf had accosted him in the fog outside the house of Myles Rossitter till the present moment, the whole mystery was so full of unexplainable events that he felt his mind reel when he tried to locate them in their proper sequence. No doubt the doctor was right, and he wanted a good rest. Yet he knew that if he slept till both mind and body cried out for natural exercise once more, nothing would shake his conviction that the adventures of the past night had actually taken place.

He turned out the lamp and went into his bedroom. A strange and unusual feeling of fear possessed him as he closed the door behind him. Supposing that the loathsome figure of the dwarf should suddenly again confront him in the half light! Suppose the body of the murdered man was really concealed somewhere in his sleeping apartment, and had escaped the careful scrutiny of Doctor Bransby and the constable? He had an uncanny sensation that he was not alone—that some unseen presence was close to him, which was evil in itself yet friendly to him. The consciousness of this so acted upon his already over-wrought nerves that he decided not to undress, but to throw himself upon his bed and wait for the comforting light of day to take the place of the flickering candle he had placed upon the table. As he divested himself of his overcoat he heard a soft thud upon the floor. With a start he looked down, and saw the packet he had found in the cab on the previous evening, the existence of which had escaped his memory. He took it up and examined it closely. It bore no name nor address, and was wrapped up in several folds of tissue paper. Was this another link in the lengthening chain of mystery?

With trembling fingers he loosened the outer coverings, and found they concealed a small, square leather case upon which rested a man's visiting card. He had to stoop over the candle to read the name upon it, and the feeling of unreality grew stronger as he saw that the card in his hand belonged to Myles Rossitter—the father of the woman he loved.

The case opened easily to his pressure and, as
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it did so, revealed to his straining eyes an exquisite double row of diamonds, lying upon the soft daintiness of their satin cushion. Each stone appeared to be perfect in shape and cutting, and the smallest of them was the largest of its kind Clayton had ever seen outside of a jeweller's window—and not often there.

As he watched the flashing facets of the brilliants, two questions rose at once to his mind. How was it that these almost priceless gems had been left in the cab which he himself had occupied? Why was the card of Myles Rossitter included in the parcel which contained them? But the sight of that card upon the table reminded him that in one of his waistcoat pockets he held another one, which the dwarf had pressed into his hand when they stood together in the fog outside the millionaire's house in Berkeley Square.

With feverish haste he felt for it, and produced it. Much as he hated having to touch it, he gave a sigh of relief as he drew the card out and examined it. Here, at any rate, was proof that the events of the past night had been no illusion nor dream. He stared down upon the little piece of pasteboard in his hand, and read the name and address it bore. What he saw was as follows :

Mr E. Christopher Moreland,
6 Acton Chambers,
Ryder Street,
Piccadilly.

Clayton read and re-read many times the words upon the card in his hand before he returned it to his

pocket. They conveyed nothing to his memory, and he felt more certain than ever that he had not met the dwarf before. It was not likely that he should have forgotten the occasion had it happened. He then, with some difficulty, slipped the case of jewels into one of his trouser pockets, and, having got into his dressing-gown, threw himself upon the bed. He felt utterly exhausted, both physically and mentally.

His last thought before sinking into a deep and dreamless sleep, was one of thankfulness, as he remembered that neither at the Police Station nor afterwards in the presence of Doctor Bransby and the constable, had he made any mention of Verna Rossitter's name, nor of the bribe which the dwarf had offered to him as the condition of his friendship.

"Thank God her name has been kept out of this hateful business," he muttered sleepily. "I would rather lose my right hand than have her in any way associated with mysteries of this kind."

Yet what connection was there between the presence of the dwarf in his room last night and the insidious reference to the girl? By what right did he dare to claim authority for influencing her future life in the way he had done?

It was while trying to answer these two important questions that Lawrence Clayton fell asleep, and the first faint twilight of dawn flickered through his window with its message that another day was born.

The man's body stirred uneasily upon the narrow bed, and the pressure of his hand tightened upon the

hidden pocket containing the case of diamonds which the dwarf had sought upon the corpse of the murdered stranger but a few hours previously. Once more did the weary lips move faintly, and they shaped themselves into one word.

“Verna.”

CHAPTER V

THE morning was far advanced, and the grey glow of a wintry sun was upon the walls when Clayton awoke from his sleep. For a few moments he lay there, hovering between the consciousness of life and the unreality of dreamland. As his brain became clearer, he began to remember the events of the last twenty-four hours, and an expression of mingled horror and anxiety came to his face. Instinctively he clenched the hand at his side, and felt it close upon something hard in his pocket.

Then these memories were not the result of some ghastly dream after all ! They had really happened.

He sprang out of bed, and hurriedly accomplished his toilet, wondering all the time how it was that he felt so fit and well after his recent experiences. It must be due to his long and refreshing sleep. Doctor Bransby had been right. Rest was the tonic he required.

He found his breakfast placed as usual upon a chair outside his door, and brought it into the room. The tea was cold, and the two boiled eggs were as hard as bricks, but he consumed the meal with relish and appetite. There was much to be done, and but little time to waste. He glanced at his watch, and saw it was nearly mid-day.

While he was enjoying the whiffs of his first pipe,

he decided upon his course of action. There were three imperative duties which lay before him. The first one was to go at once to the Police Station, and find out if any proof had yet been obtained with regard to the accuracy of his statement made there a few hours ago. Secondly—and he looked once more at the card he had taken from his pocket with feelings of distrust—it was essential that he should pay a visit to the address given him by his unwelcome guest of the previous night, and find out all he could about him. Thirdly, he must call at the house in Berkeley Square, and return to Myles Rossitter the case of diamonds which carried his card. It would be time enough after he had performed these duties to determine what he should do next. He knocked the tobacco out of his half-emptied pipe, and, having fetched his hat and stick, he left the chambers. Before he went downstairs he took care to double lock his outer door. He did not want any more visits from uninvited strangers during his absence.

Lawrence Clayton's visit to the Police Station was in every respect an unsatisfactory one. The officials on duty were not the same men he had dealt with on the former occasion. It was evident that—after referring to the book in which his statement had been recorded—they looked upon his story with doubt and suspicion, and he was civilly informed that there was so far nothing to add to the information he had already given.

It was with a feeling of disquietude not unmixed with anger that Clayton at last turned his steps westward in the direction of that luxurious and somewhat mysterious quarter which lies in the centre

of fashionable clubland, and is the happy hunting-ground for single men of independent means, who live in flats and chambers very different to the humble quarters where Clayton made his home. He had no difficulty in finding his way to the address he sought, for he knew that district well, and on rare occasions, had enjoyed a sumptuous lunch or dinner with a wealthy acquaintance or client at one of the palatial Pall Mall clubs. He found the building was a comparatively new one, and in a few moments he reached the landing outside the door of which he saw the number he was seeking. Having pressed the electric button, he stood and waited, wondering how he would be received by his host, and what explanation would be given of his extraordinary conduct.

After some delay, the door was opened by a tall, thin man, whose manner and appearance at once proclaimed him to be a foreigner. Clayton felt in his pocket for his card-case, and, with an exclamation of annoyance, found he had left it behind him.

“Does Mr Christopher Moreland live here?”

“Yes, sir,” the man answered with a slight foreign accent.

“Is he at home?”

“Yes, sir.”

The man assisted Clayton out of his coat, but his arms had scarcely left the sleeves when he remembered the parcel he had put in one of the pockets. As the servant crossed the hall to hang it upon the rack, he called him back.

“I think it will be safer to keep that coat on,” he

said. "I am a bit heated with my walk, and climbing all these stairs, and I do not want to catch a chill. At this time of year one has to be careful about such things. Thank you."

Clayton felt more at ease when he had the coat upon his back again, with the precious parcel safely pressed against his side. Then he followed his conductor across the dimly-lit hall, and into a room to the left of him. It was furnished with every evidence of luxury and of taste, and the furniture was both costly and inviting.

"What name, sir?"

"Mr Lawrence Clayton."

"Does Mr Moreland expect you, sir?"

"I think you will probably find he does, if you mention my name to him," Clayton replied. "I shall be glad if you will let him know I am here as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir. I will tell him at once."

The man left the room with noiseless steps, and Clayton looked curiously round the apartment in which he found himself. He could not believe that this was the home of the ill-dressed little dwarf who had forced his company upon him in so unceremonious a way. Everything about him bespoke not only a keen artistic taste, but the possession of considerable wealth as well. There were many pictures upon the walls, both foreign and of the modern English schools, but each one was a gem in its way. The tables and brackets were well covered with dainty silver and china ornaments—the vases were filled with choice hothouse flowers—and many photographs in frames ornamented the

mantelpiece. The room had an appearance more like the boudoir of some fashionable society lady than the man he had come to see. Clayton stepped to the table between the long windows, and admired the writing materials upon it. They were of embossed silver, and he was surprised to notice that each one of them carried a crest upon it, surmounted by an earl's coronet.

As he moved back to the fireplace, he heard the door open behind him, and he nerved himself to preserve his self-control while he once more met the little freak of manhood whom he had seen so short a time ago, and under such mysterious circumstances.

He hesitated before he raised his eyes to the face of his host. When he did so, he hastily repressed the exclamation of surprise which rose to his lips. For the man who advanced to meet him was not the dwarf at all.

He was a gentleman of middle height, slim of build and delicate in appearance. He was clean-shaved, and the cut of his clothes would have done credit to any West End tailor. Then he suddenly remembered that on more than one occasion he had noticed this man at the big receptions which he had attended at Myles Rossitter's house. The fact which located him in Clayton's mind was that he walked with some difficulty, and was obliged to support himself upon a couple of sticks.

"I am Christopher Moreland," he said, and a smile which was distinctly pleasant to see came to his face as he spoke. "I presume you have called to see me in answer to my advertisement?"

For a few moments there was an awkward pause.

"I—I am afraid I have made an unfortunate mistake," Clayton said. "I certainly expected to meet here a person who calls himself Christopher Moreland. He gave me his card last night, and—and asked me to call. I must apologise for this intrusion."

"Ah. Then you have not come in answer to my advertisement?"

"Advertisement! What advertisement?"

"I inserted one in the *Times* a couple of days ago. It was for a confidential secretary, and I have already interviewed more than a dozen applicants for the post, but unfortunately none of them appear to be suitable. Will you take a seat? I have only recently come out of a nursing home after a severe operation, and it tires me to stand for any length of time."

Clayton sat down upon the nearest chair. He was glad of this excuse to give him time to collect his thoughts. If this man was Christopher Moreland, as he had every reason to believe was the case, what had happened to the dwarf whose card bore the address at which he found himself? Although his brain was perfectly clear, he could not understand the position at all.

"I have not come to answer any advertisement," he said. "I was given a card last night by a stranger, who asked me to call at this address." He paused, and it was some time before he continued speaking. "I regret I cannot give you the circumstances under which your card was—doubtless by mistake—handed to me. I can only repeat my regret at having troubled you—and take my leave."

He rose in some confusion as he spoke, but Moreland put out a thin hand with a gesture of restraint.

"Please do not go. This situation interests me, and I should like—if possible—to hear more about the cause which has brought it about."

Clayton shook his head, though he resumed his seat as he did so.

"I am unable to enlighten you upon that matter," he said. "It is a private and personal affair which concerns myself only."

Moreland accepted the refusal with a smile, and did not press the question.

"Have you got my card with you?"

"Yes. It is here in my pocket."

"Will you allow me to see it for a moment?"

"With pleasure. In fact I think I had better leave it with you, as I have no further use for it."

Clayton felt in his pocket for the card, and produced it without delay. He handed it to the man in front of him, but, as he did so, another card—of equal size and shape—slipped from beneath it on to Moreland's knee. As he leaned back upon the sofa, he held two cards in his hand, and was looking at them attentively.

"The mistake you have made is easily explained," he said with a laugh. "These cards have become stuck together. One of them is undoubtedly mine. The other belongs to—somebody else." He gave the second card back to Clayton as he spoke. The pleasant smile had left his face, and his features had formed themselves into a curious, mask-like expression. "I see it belongs to my neighbour here, who occupies the flat opposite to this one."

Clayton was looking curiously at the second card, upon which he read the following name and address,

Mr Edwin Harris,
5 Acton Chambers,
Ryder Street,
Piccadilly.

"Do you happen to know this—this person, Harris?" he asked, after a pause.

"Yes, I know him slightly," Moreland replied with a grim smile. "But we do not often meet. He is somewhat eccentric in his manner and appearance."

"Eccentric! I should not use so complimentary a term to describe him. I have seen little enough of the creature, but the impression he gave me was that he is more devilish than human."

Clayton suddenly checked himself, fearing that he had already said more than was wise under the circumstances. Fortunately, his host did not seem to notice the warmth of his words. He merely shrugged his shoulders, and shifted his position upon the sofa.

"I conclude, from the mistake that has been made, that you have got an appointment with Mr Harris to-day," he said. "He must have forgotten all about it, for I saw a notice upon his door this morning to the effect that he was going out of town, and would not be back till late in the evening."

"Then I shall have to return here after dinner, that is all," Clayton said, as he rose for the second time to take his departure. "It is important that I should see him as soon as possible. By the way,

are you at liberty to tell me anything about him? What is your opinion of the man? What sort of life does he live? Do you think he is diseased in his mind, as well as deformed in his body?"

"You are asking a lot of questions, Mr Clayton, and I should have no objection to answering them, had I the power to do so. This will sound all the more strange when I tell you that the man, Harris, is, in a way, my tenant."

"Your tenant!"

"Yes. The flat in which he now lives was originally occupied by a friend of mine, who died suddenly a year ago. His death was a great shock to me, and in a moment of somewhat hasty sentiment—which I confess I have never regretted—I took over his lease from the landlord of this building. I did not like the idea of the rooms he had occupied being tenanted by some noisy and perhaps undesirable person. Most of the chambers in this neighbourhood are, as you know, occupied by unmarried men, and some of them would not be pleasant neighbours for an invalid like myself. The rooms had not been vacant more than a week when I got a generous offer from Harris, and he became my tenant. As I have already told you, I have no cause to regret my action."

"But surely you could not have a more unpleasant neighbour!"

"If you judge from his appearance, you are right. But that was the chief reason why I accepted his offer. A man with his physical infirmities would be the least likely to indulge in noisy, and perhaps vicious dissipations, as he would probable have few

—if any—friends to entertain. My surmise has proved correct. I admit that his personality is not an attractive one, from an artistic point of view. But he keeps entirely to himself, and has no visitors. I do not think I have met him more than half a dozen times since he has been here."

"But what sort of life does he live?"

"As far as I know, it is the life of a recluse. He keeps no servants, and only leaves his rooms when other people are in bed, or when there is the least likelihood of his appearance being noticed. From my point of view, he is an ideal tenant and neighbour."

"Well, I should be very sorry to feel I had a creature like that man living so close to me," Clayton said with an involuntary shudder. "But I have detained you too long, and I have a busy afternoon before me. Please accept once more my apology for this intrusion, and my thanks for your courtesy in seeing me."

They shook hands, and Moreland led the way to the door. As his guest passed on to the outside landing, he pointed to the door facing the one where they stood. Upon it was fastened a small, square sheet of paper.

"There is our friend's notice," he said. "You can read it for yourself. If you would like to leave any message with me, as to the hour when you will call again, I shall be glad to send my servant with it as soon as Mr Harris returns."

"Many thanks," Clayton replied cordially. "That would be very kind of you, as I should be sorry to miss him a second time. I shall come round at

about ten o'clock to-night. I want to get the interview over as soon as possible. Good-day."

"Good-day. Then I will send a message to that effect this evening after dinner. It ought to find him all right. You will call at ten o'clock."

As Clayton stepped out into the street, he unconsciously muttered three words.

"The mystery deepens."

CHAPTER VI

IT was not till late in the afternoon that Clayton presented himself at the great mansion in Berkeley Square which was the town residence of the well-known millionaire, Myles Rossitter. While he was waiting for his bell to be answered, he looked at the spot where he had stood in the fog on the previous night—the spot where he had first made the acquaintance of the dwarf, Harris. How much had happened since then! How different was his present quest to that other one!

Past experience had taught him that this was the most likely hour to find Myles Rossitter at home, so he had taken the precaution of leaving a note earlier in the afternoon, requesting an interview upon a matter of "urgent private business." Hidden in an inner pocket of his coat was the parcel containing the diamonds. During that day his hand had often been pressed to the side of his chest to make sure that they were safe, and more than once had he congratulated himself that they had not left his possession when he had expected to be again confronted by the dwarf in Moreland's flat. The risk would have been obvious.

Then the door opened, and a powdered footman in livery stood upon the threshold.

"Is Mr Rossitter at home!"

"Yes, sir. I think he is expecting you. Will you step this way?"

Clayton followed the man across the hall and into the familiar study, where he had so often enjoyed a cigar and the port of a priceless vintage with his wealthy host. He wondered if he would have the delight of seeing Verna Rossitter upon this occasion! He felt that he deserved such a reward, for had he not brought back to her parent that case in his pocket? The jewels must in some way be connected with him, and, but for his own good-luck, might never have been restored to their owner.

He had not long to wait, for in a few moments Myles Rossitter entered the room. Clayton at once noticed the expression upon his face, which was neither pleasant nor friendly. The millionaire motioned his guest to a chair, and Clayton saw that no hand was held out in greeting. As soon as they were seated, the elder man opened the conversation, and the tone of his voice was not conducive to the exchange of friendly confidences.

"When I received your note this afternoon, Mr Clayton, my first inclination was to write and tell you that any interview between us at the present time was unnecessary. Upon second thoughts, I decided that it would be best for it to take place, so that we may understand our relative positions once and for all. After what I hear has passed between my daughter and yourself, I confess I am surprised you should have desired to come to my house again uninvited. Although I am grateful for the assistance you were once able to render me, I regret to find you have taken advantage of that hospitality

which was so freely offered—and accepted. I understand that Verna has written you a letter which will at once put an end to any thoughts you entertained with regard to a possible marriage with her. I must honestly tell you that such a union is impossible, and that—even if it were so—it would not meet with my approval."

After this pompous and verbose speech, Myles Rossitter sat back in his chair and stared at his guest, waiting to hear what he might have to say. Clayton, whose temper was easily roused, leaned forward with a flush upon his face. He was indignant both with the tone and manner in which he was addressed.

"My visit this evening has nothing whatever to do with your daughter," he said coldly. "I have received the letter to which you refer, but it has no connection with the object of my presence here now."

"Then to what do I owe the honour of this visit?"

"To a matter which personally concerns yourself."

"Myself!"

For an instant the cold eyes of the millionaire drooped before the gaze which was fixed upon him. Clayton had made up his mind to say nothing about the events of the last twenty-four hours. That midnight conversation with the dwarf in his rooms had proved that there was some illicit tie between these men, and he was determined not to involve Verna's name in the affair. He was present upon this occasion for one purpose only, and that was to find

out if the jewels in his pocket belonged to her parent, and if so, to return them.

"I am afraid I do not follow you," Rossitter said after a pause. "You say that you have called here upon a personal matter which concerns myself. If this is the case, I must tell you at once that our interview is at an end. A man in my position is often solicited for interviews which only concern himself, and my experience has taught me they have only one common object in view."

Clayton reddened with suppressed anger.

"And what object is that?"

"Blackmail."

Clayton sprang forward with an oath upon his lips.

"Look here, Mr Rossitter," he said. "There is never smoke without fire. But I should have thought that, with so much experience as you appear to have had, you might be able to distinguish between those persons you have cause to fear—and those whom you have not."

Myles Rossitter shifted uneasily upon his seat, and his eyes sought every part of the room except the one where sat the man who confronted him.

"What is the object of your visit here this evening?" he asked.

"I have come to return to you something which I believe you have lost."

"I have lost nothing. To what do you refer?"

"I refer to a necklace of diamonds which has been found with your card attached to the case."

Myles Rossitter started visibly, and for an instant his gaze flickered towards the chair upon which Clayton sat.

"Then they were found?" he exclaimed in a questioning voice. "Where?"

"They were found last night in a cab."

"Who found them?"

"I did."

"You!"

The burly figure of the millionaire leaned forward, and Clayton saw that his hands were trembling upon the arms of the chair where they rested.

"Yes, I found them. It was quite by chance. You remember there was a heavy fog last night? I got into a cab which happened to stop outside the restaurant where I had been dining. I found the parcel upon the seat, and put it in my pocket. I did not examine it till later, and then I found your card with the jewel case."

"Did you see who got out from the cab?"

"No. The fog was too thick, and I was in a hurry. I believe it had been occupied by two men, for their figures passed me as I entered it."

"What were they like?"

"I did not trouble to look at them. It was no business of mine. They were probably on their way to dine—and I hope they enjoyed their meal more than I did."

Myles Rossitter gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling above him. Clayton, who knew his face well by this time, was surprised to see the expression of ill suppressed anxiety upon it.

"What did you do with the parcel?" Rossitter asked presently.

"I put it in my pocket—and there it is at the present time."

"Do you mean to say you have got the diamonds with you—here?"

Clayton drew the packet from his pocket, and held it out in his hand. Miles Rossiter seized it eagerly, and began to unfold the many wraps of thin paper. When the case lay open on his knee, he glanced up at the man in front of him. The look upon his face was not a pleasant one to see.

"What reward do you claim for returning this to me?" he asked. "I presume you know they are of very great value."

Clayton tapped his foot impatiently upon the floor.

"I do not ask for any reward," he replied coldly. "After your disgraceful insinuations about the cause of my visit here, it would be an additional insult for you to offer one. If the diamonds are yours, I am only returning them to their rightful owner. I suppose they *are* yours?"

"Yes. They belong to me."

Rossiter had taken the glittering brilliants out of the case, and was standing near the table examining them carefully. There was a nasty look in his eyes as he held them up in his hand, so that they dangled between him and the electric globes upon the walls.

"Ah! So you want no reward for returning these jewels to me?" he asked, and there was a sneer in his voice as he spoke. "It is an opportunity which few poor men would miss."

"I have already told you that I will accept nothing," Clayton said, rising from his seat. "It is true I am a poor man, but that is no reason why you should insult me."

"But I will reward you all the same," Rossitter

said with a grim laugh. "I am not sure I ought not to do so by handing you over to the police, but—under the circumstances—I will satisfy my sense of generosity by giving this parcel back to you—diamonds and all. They are excellent imitations of the original articles, but not quite good enough to deceive an experienced man like myself."

As he spoke, he put the case containing the jewels upon the table, and pushed it towards Clayton.

"What the devil do you mean?" Lawrence asked furiously. "Do you mean to imply that I have tampered with them? By God! If you do not give me a straight answer, I will strangle the truth from your throat. The parcel is in the same condition as that in which I found it last night. Nobody has touched it except myself. If the stones are imitation ones, then the fault is not mine. How dare you suggest that I have changed them? Tell me—have you recently parted with a necklace similar to this one?"

"Yes, I have."

"And you say this is an imitation of the original one?"

"There is no doubt about it."

"Can you prove it?"

Myles Rossitter took the case in his hands, and held it towards his guest.

"Have you taken these stones out of their case, and felt the weight of them in your palm?"

"Yes," Clayton answered. "I examined them carefully early this morning, in my rooms."

"I presume you have no knowledge of the relative weight of diamonds of this size?"

"None whatever. But the necklace seemed to be

exceedingly heavy for the number of stones it contains."

Rossitter lifted the glittering article from the case, and handed it to the man in front of him.

"Do you call that heavy?" he asked.

Clayton took the brilliants in his hand. As his fingers closed round them, he almost dropped them in amazement. They were as light as tinsel.

"My God!" he gasped. "What devil's trick is this? You are right. They are not the stones I found last night. Yet—yet they have been in my pocket ever since, and nobody could have changed them without my knowledge. Look! There is your own card among the paper! That is sufficient proof that the parcel has not been tampered with. I swear nobody has either seen or touched them except—"

"Except yourself," Rossitter added, with an ugly look in his eyes.

"Confound you!" Clayton exclaimed angrily. "So you suspect me of changing them? Had that been my wish, I should neither have known how to do so, nor should I have had the time. Besides, I certainly would not have brought them back to you." He hesitated, and looked nervously round the room. "There is only one man who could have done this thing—and I would not trust him in heaven or in hell."

"Is he a friend of yours?" Rossitter asked, and the sneer lengthened upon his lips. "If, as you say, the case has not been out of your possession since the time you found it and the present moment, I can think of nobody who could have changed it—except yourself."

For a moment it looked as if Clayton was going

to strike the man who stood so cool and provocative before him. But the upraised arm fell to his side. He suddenly remembered that he was talking to the father of the girl he loved.

"Look here, Mr Rossitter," he said. "You have insulted me more than once to-night. Let us play the straight game with each other—if you are able and willing to do so. I do not want to harm you, but—by God! your life is not worth a moment's thought if you continue to adopt your present attitude towards me." He pointed towards the case which lay among the paper upon the table between them. "I found that parcel last night in a cab, and I have come here now to return it to the man I presume to be the rightful owner."

"They are not diamonds," Rossitter said coldly. "They are not worth the case they are in."

"And I maintain that it has not been touched since it first came into my possession," Clayton said quickly.

There followed a long silence. It was Rossitter who broke it.

"Do you still say that the contents are the same as when you first opened the parcel?"

"No, I do not. The diamonds have been extracted, and worthless imitations have been put in their place. I admit that must have happened."

"But you say they never left your pocket since you found them! How can you reconcile the two statements?"

"I cannot!" Clayton gasped. "I cannot! But I swear I am speaking the truth, or else why should I be here?"

"You referred to some other man just now," Rossitter said evenly. "Somebody whom you would not trust in heaven or in hell. Who is he?"

"He is a dwarf. And——"

The millionaire started violently, and his hand rested heavily upon the table.

"A dwarf! What is his name?"

"His name is—Harris."

"Good God! W-what do you know of about that—that man?"

"I know more about the dwarf, Edwin Harris, than——"

But Clayton did not finish his sentence, for, with a sudden cry, the burly figure of Myles Rossitter lurched heavily forward, and fell with a dull thud to the floor.

CHAPTER VII

As soon as Clayton had summoned Rossitter's valet, and sent for a doctor, he left the house, and walked back through the crowded streets to his own rooms. He did not notice the shrill cries of the paper boys, nor did he pause to look at the glaring posters of the evening papers which were displayed at most of the street corners he passed. Had he done so, he would either have heard or read the news that a mysterious murder had been committed and discovered in the Temple, and would instantly have bought one of the halfpenny sheets. The information was conveyed to him in quite a different—and less pleasant—manner, for, upon reaching his home, he suddenly came face to face with a constable in uniform who at once asked for his name.

"I am Mr Lawrence Clayton," he replied. "Have you any information for me from the police station?"

The man did not reply at once. He was looking at Clayton's face with an expression of curiosity.

"I should like a few words with you, Mr Clayton," he said in a gruff voice. "May I accompany you to your rooms upstairs?"

"By all means. Come this way. Have you been waiting here long?"

The constable did not answer, but proceeded to

follow Clayton up the steep staircase. As soon as they reached the upper landing, and had entered the rooms, he turned to the man beside him.

"I must ask you to come with me to the Station at once, sir," he said. "A discovery has been made which seems connected with the statement you made to the police last night, and your presence is required there."

"What is the discovery?" Clayton asked, and the constable did not fail to notice the relief which was expressed in his voice. "Has the body been found?"

"Well, sir, a body has been found."

"Where?"

"It was discovered by the caretaker here this afternoon, when she entered the unoccupied rooms on the ground floor. But I would rather you ask me no questions, sir. They will be able to give you all the information you require at headquarters. Are you prepared to go there with me now?"

"I am entirely at your service," Clayton replied. "The sooner we get to the bottom of this business, the better I shall be pleased. Where is the body?"

"It has been taken to the mortuary, and is lying there now."

In less than half an hour Clayton had viewed the corpse. He was minutely questioned by the Inspector on duty, but, as he had nothing to add to his former statement, he was allowed to return to his rooms on the understanding that his services would be at the disposal of the police authorities whenever they were required. After a tiring and far from pleasant hour's work, he went home and

partook of a frugal dinner, for which he had no appetite, although he had tasted no food since his breakfast that morning.

It was a hurried meal, for he had not forgotten that he was due at the dwarf's flat at ten o'clock. The time had slipped quickly by during the evening, and he found it was already past the half hour when he started upon his weird quest to Ryder Street. The clock of St James's Church, Piccadilly, struck the hour as he reached the landing outside No. 5 Acton Chambers. The notice had been removed from the door, so evidently the dwarf had returned.

Several minutes passed after he rang the bell before the door was opened. To Clayton's surprise, he found it was worked by some mechanical arrangement from inside. There was no servant waiting for him in the passage where he stood. But as he paused in the half light, he heard the soft, fluty voice of the dwarf speaking to him from a room near by, the door of which was open.

"Come in, Mr Clayton, come in. Forgive my seeming want of hospitality. I keep no servants here, and I have had a tiring day in the country. I am obliged to rest, and leave my guests to look after themselves. Come in."

Clayton moved in the direction from which the voice came, and a chill passed through him as he looked upon the scene which was presented to his view. The only articles of furniture in the apartment were a large, square table, upon which stood the remains of a meal, and a few chairs. A deep sofa was drawn up to one side of the fire, which burned cheerily, and afforded the only light in the

room. Upon the sofa was the figure of the dwarf. On the near side of the hearthrug stood an arm-chair, of generous proportions, though faded and fusty in appearance.

"Take a seat, Mr Clayton. Pray take a seat," the dwarf said, and though his voice sounded tired it had lost none of its richness. "I fear there is not much choice, but what I have is at your disposal."

The extraordinary self-assurance of this little human freak almost took Clayton's breath away. He found himself following his strange host's directions without any hesitation. In fact there did not seem to be any other alternative. As soon as he was seated, the ungainly figure upon the sofa slowly uncoiled itself, and, with an evident effort, raised itself to its full height upon the ground. If it had appeared revolting on the previous night, it was infinitely more hideous under the present circumstances. Clayton noticed the clumsy, distorted limbs, and the great rolls of loose flesh that hung round the neck, and the large hands. The trunk of the body appeared to have sunk some inches between the thighs, so that the outline of the form suggested that of some loathsome monstrosity rather than that of a human being. The features of the face could hardly be seen under the heavy covering of hair, but Clayton felt that the steady, watchful gaze of those eyes was fixed upon him with a penetrating stare.

The figure shuffled uneasily to the table, at the far end of which were a decanter, a syphon, and some tumblers. Clayton watched the hands feeling among the glasses, and felt sick at the thought of

drinking from anything which had been touched by those fingers.

"Will you have a drink?" the dwarf asked, turning slowly round, so that the ruddy fire-light fell full upon his bearded face. "You have had an anxious time lately, and a little stimulant would do you good."

"No, thank you," Clayton replied. "I have just had dinner, and I take very little of stimulants at any time."

"That is wise of you, very wise indeed," the dwarf said with a low laugh. "I wish I could say the same. But all men are not cast in the same mould, and circumstances alter cases." Again he gave a hideous chuckle. "For instance, unfortunately for me, I have not been turned out in the same shape as yourself. I am a miserable little freak, while you are a strong, well set up man. I am not paying you any compliment, I assure you. I am merely stating a fact."

While he had been speaking, the dwarf had mixed himself a generous allowance of brandy from the decanter upon the table. This he drank off without any dilution from the syphon beside him. Then he smacked his lips with satisfaction, and shuffled back to the sofa. Clayton watched him with an increasing feeling of disgust and revulsion. He was wondering how it was possible for a man as refined as Christopher Moreland to endure this ghastly abortion so near to him.

But he suddenly remembered the object of his visit, and prepared himself for what he felt sure would be a most unpleasant interview. He rose

from his seat and stood with his back to the mantelpiece, looking down upon the little figure which was once more coiled up upon the sofa.

"Look here, Mr Harris," he said with a quick indrawing of his lips. "There are several matters of importance which we have to settle together to-night. I am not a man of many words, and I shall be obliged if you will give me straight answers to my questions."

"Your manner and mode of expressing yourself are hardly as friendly as I could wish them to be," the dwarf said gently. "I cannot imagine what can be the matter of importance which you are so anxious to discuss, unless it is the one which I took the liberty of mentioning to you last night when we met in—Berkeley Square."

"You know perfectly well to what I refer," Clayton said.

"I fear you have me at a disadvantage. I gave you my card last night, and expressed a hope that you would call and see me upon a matter which I thought might prove to be to your interest. Beyond that fact, I cannot recall any other subject of conversation between us worthy of our consideration here to-night."

"Have you forgotten what happened after our meeting in Berkeley Square?" Clayton asked. "Have you forgotten how you followed me to my rooms, and there found me alone with the dead body of an unknown man? Have you forgotten the bribe you offered me for my friendship—if I accepted yours? Have you forgotten that I left you alone in my chambers with a corpse, and—that

when I returned—I found these chambers empty? Good God! Have you forgotten all that?"

The figure upon the sofa squirmed slightly, and the hairy face was lifted for an instant above the heavy clothes.

"My dear Mr Clayton, with all due respect to you, I think you have been drawing too freely upon your imagination. What did you eat and drink last night?"

"Drink be damned," Clayton exclaimed angrily. "You know perfectly well that what I have told you is the truth."

The heavy head upon the cushion moved slowly from side to side.

"I regret to say I know nothing of the kind. It all sounds very interesting, and not without a touch of the picturesque, but I have not had the pleasure of seeing you since we parted in Berkeley Square. All this story about our meeting in your rooms and finding a corpse there is surely a creation of your imagination."

"It is nothing of the sort, and you know that as well as I do," Clayton said. "It is easy enough for me to prove the truth of what I say."

"Then I wish you would kindly do so," whispered the soft voice from the sofa. "It would save us much time and misunderstanding."

Clayton began to pace up and down the room in deep thought. He knew that the eyes of the dwarf were watching his every movement, and he tried his best to marshal the facts of his case in a way that would leave no cause for doubt. His mind was vigorous and alert. He remembered each detail

of the past night with perfect clearness, but the more he considered his position the more he realized that he could offer no evidence in support of the assertions he had made. The whole situation was improbable. He could not produce one single witness to verify the fact that the dwarf had actually visited his room after they had parted outside Myles Rossitter's house.

"I am still waiting for some proof of the statements you have just made," Harris said, "though we are both aware that the whole story is a fabrication."

"That is a lie."

Again the dwarf shifted his position, and rearranged the cushions behind his head.

"Well. Then let us leave it at that," he said gently. "It will be best for our mutual convenience and satisfaction. Let us now turn our attention to the object of your visit here to-night. That is a matter of far greater interest and importance than the after-effects of dreams that are due to indigestion—or other causes."

"Damn you!" Clayton exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"I refer to the disinterested motive which prompted me to ask you to call and see me. If you want a pleasant job—and a paying one—I think I can put it in your way."

"And your price?"

The heavy, distorted shoulders were raised in an apologetic movement, but the eyes of the dwarf did not for a moment leave the face of the man who confronted him.

"I only ask for your friendship, and your implicit obedience to my wishes," was the answer. "It is very little to ask, for I shall have but small need to claim your services."

"What is your offer?"

"That you apply for the post of secretary to Mr Christopher Moreland, who lives in the flat opposite to this one."

"Why do you want me to do this thing?"

"Because I am anxious to be your friend."

"Then I refuse," Clayton said coldly. "I have no wish to be your friend, nor do I ever want to set eyes on you again. I believe you are more devil than human, and I loathe the very sight of you."

"Then there is nothing more to be said on the matter," the dwarf whispered, as he lurched slowly forward into a sitting position. With a painful effort he touched a handle upon the wall, and then sank back exhausted among the pillows.

"Will you please let yourself out," came the soft, musical voice, "and do not forget to shut the door after you. I think I told you that I keep no servants here. Good-night."

Clayton left the flat with a shudder, and was glad to draw in a long breath of the cold air when he reached the street outside.

CHAPTER VIII

DURING the next few days Clayton suffered from what might with reason have been called a nervous breakdown, which was evidently due to a reaction from the strain he had endured during the events narrated in the preceding chapters. He kept entirely to his rooms, only leaving them to attend the inquest upon the body of the dead man. The result of the keen interrogations that were then put to him only added to the mystery. The verdict of the jury was an open one—namely, that death had occurred under suspicious circumstances, and from causes unknown. The *post-mortem* examination produced no evidence as to how the man had come to such an end. The medical opinion was that he was in robust health at the time of his decease, and no trace of organic trouble could be found in his system. It was also proved that he had not died in any kind of fit, nor was there any mark of violence found upon the body. Although the police gave no credence to Clayton's story about the dwarf's visit to his rooms, yet the most searching enquiries failed to explain how the body came to be discovered in the unused chambers of the same building. Supposing Clayton's statement was correct, how was it possible for anyone to escape from a room upon the third floor, the door of which had

been doubly locked? Besides, there was no reason why the dwarf should wish to remove the corpse, even had he been strong enough to perform such a feat. It was never suggested that he had murdered the unknown man.

But not the least mysterious part of the medical examination of the body was the discovery of certain strange symptoms which defied all explanation. These were the acute contraction of all the muscles and tissues of the joints, though in every other respect they were in a perfectly healthy condition. The caretaker who lived in the basement had been interviewed, but, as she was afflicted both in her sight and her hearing, it was realized that the entrance and exit of a stranger—coming into and leaving the rooms above her—could pass unnoticed. Photographs of the dead man's face were freely circulated in the London and provincial papers, but no relatives or friend came forward to claim him. Clayton's explanation of this fact to the police was that the contraction of muscles which had taken place after death had so altered the expression of the face that the likeness would probably not be recognized. On being closely questioned if he would swear that the corpse was the same as the one he stated he had found in his own room, Clayton was obliged to confess that he was not sufficiently clear upon the point of identity to do so upon oath. He had only seen the body once, and the shock had been such a severe one to him that he could only say that—in view of the other circumstances of the case—he had every reason to believe it was the same man. The proceedings did not excite much public interest,

and the Press soon found some more popular and sensational information to give to its readers.

The police had no difficulty in interviewing the dwarf at his flat, but he denied all knowledge of having been to Clayton's rooms on the night in question, though he admitted at once, and without reserve, that he had spoken to him earlier in the evening, when they were both standing in the fog outside Myles Rossitter's house. In a week's time the whole occurrence was forgotten, except by three people—Clayton, the dwarf, and Myles Rossitter.

But each night did Clayton take care to double lock the door that opened from his chambers upon the landing. He had a horror of another visit from the man Harris. In the mental condition in which he found himself, he felt he could not endure another sight of that little bearded deformity.

After a week of seclusion, he was strong enough to face the outer world again. Indeed it was very necessary that he should do so, for the state of his finances was such as to cause him considerable disquiet and uneasiness. He had been left undisturbed, except by the old caretaker who brought his meals and looked after his rooms. Not a single client had been near him, and his position was becoming a desperate one. He had varied the monotony of his life by writing a long letter to Verna Rossitter, asking her to reconsider the decision conveyed by her last missive to him, and the hope that an answer would shortly reach him was the only bright spot in his dreary days and restless nights. But in this respect he was disappointed. Whether his letter reached her or not he could not

tell—perhaps it had fallen into the hands of her father. At any rate, no postman's knock sounded upon his door. During those days life was indeed a hell to him.

But Clayton possessed one great friend, and it was the remembrance of him that nerved him to sufficient energy to leave his rooms and seek once more the comfort of human companionship. This man was an artist—Athol M'Lean by name—who, in spite of his Scottish names and origin, had spent all his life since early manhood in a tiny house in a back square of Chelsea. M'Lean was also a poor man, in spite of the fact that he was a great artist, though it was freely said in Bohemian circles that he had a future of success before him. Fortunately he was still young enough to be ambitious and old enough to realize his limitations.

It was to this chum of his boyhood that Clayton went to ease his mind. He longed to hear the voice of a human friend once more.

He walked all the way to Chelsea, and was at once admitted by M'Lean himself, looking very workman-like in his much stained overall.

“My dear Lawrence, I am delighted to see you,” was the genial welcome, and Clayton already felt a stronger man at the sound of these few words. “We have not met for ages, and if I had not been so infernally busy lately I should have looked you up to see what mischief you have been getting into. Come in.”

They were soon seated, one upon each side of the fire, in the comfortable studio where M'Lean spent most of his time. The room was a large one, and

built out at the back of the house. Of course, it was very untidy, and each table was littered with drawing and painting utensils, while over-filled portfolios leaned against the walls. Above them hung a miscellaneous collection of paintings in every condition of completion, and the corners of the apartment were filled with great boxes, from which protruded coloured materials of every imaginable hue and texture. There were few ornaments about the room, but the shelf that lined the top of the dado held several quaint specimens of green and blue pottery, old pewter, and odds and ends of strange fashioned curios.

"Well, old man, and how have you been since we last met?" M'Lean asked, as he filled an enormous pipe and slowly lighted it. "Have you at last come to tell me that you are appointed Lord Chancellor, and I am to be offered the post of President of the Royal Academy? By Jove, how I should clean out that stable if the job came my way! Have a drink?"

Clayton shook his head, and took a cigarette from the box upon the table beside him.

"I have been having the hell of a time," he said.

"The devil you have! Well, now that I come to look at you, you do not seem to be quite up to concert pitch. What has been the matter? Come, if you want to have a mental and a moral spring-cleaning—this is your chance."

Clayton smiled, but there was little of mirth in his look.

"I want a friend," he said in a low voice, "that is why I have come to you."

"And you have come to the right man," Athol exclaimed, as his face became suddenly grave. "We are old pals, Lawrence, and you must tell me just as much or as little as you like. I cannot offer you more than my friendship, for I have nothing else to offer, but anything I can do for you, old chap—well, you know the rest, and, by God, I mean it."

M'Lean rose from his chair with outstretched hand, and Clayton took it in a firm grip.

"I know that," he said rather huskily. "That is why I am here. Men are so damned selfish when they are in trouble. They want all they can get—and more."

"They want all they can get at any time, whether they are in trouble or not," the artist said dryly, as he resumed his seat. "At least that is my opinion, and it is founded upon many years of pretty varied experience. Now, Lawrence, out with it. Let me hear all you have come to tell me."

So there, in the dim light of the softly shaded studio, Clayton told the story of the mystery which had filled his life during the last couple of weeks. He was careful to omit no single detail. Like his friend beside him, he was painting a series of pictures, but they were upon the canvas of his memory. M'Lean sat and listened in silence, puffing great clouds of smoke from the briar pipe he held between his lips. He was staring at the ceiling, but the lines about his eyes showed that no single word was missed. As Clayton finished his narrative, he altered his position in his chair, and

for some moments his gaze rested upon the man beside him with a curiously intent look.

"It is a strange story," Athol said, breaking the long pause which followed Clayton's last words. "It is more than one strange story, for it is two stories merged into one."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this. There is the story you have just told me, and which—if you will pardon me for saying so—is full of improbabilities. There is that other story which is quite reasonable and understandable, if you omit the episodes of meeting the dwarf in your rooms and finding the body there. I confess I find those details very difficult to believe."

"But they are absolutely true."

"Can you prove them to be so?"

"No, I cannot. The only witness present was the dwarf, Harris, and he denies the whole thing. He says he was not near my rooms at the time—that our only meeting that night was when he spoke to me in Berkeley Square."

"What view did the police take?"

Clayton shrugged his shoulders.

"They were of course obliged to adopt the same opinion. I was unable to prove the truth of my statement, and they thought that I was suffering from a delusion. From their point of view, I do not see they had any alternative. I could see from Dr Bransby's manner that he shared their opinion."

"I am strongly inclined to agree with him," M'Lean said. "As you have just mentioned, there was no alternative."

"Yet the body was actually found in the same building where my chambers are situated, and I recognized the identity of the man at once."

"But even then, you could not swear that the body was the same as the other one."

"No. Because of the contraction of the muscles of the face. But there was no doubt in my mind that it was the same body which I found upon the floor of my room, after I returned from Berkeley Square."

"Have you told me everything?"

"Yes. Everything I can remember."

"Do you know of any connection between the man Harris and Mr Christopher Moreland?"

"Nothing, except as I have told you, the dwarf is a tenant of Moreland's."

"Anything between Harris and Myles Rossitter?"

"Only the effect which my mention of the dwarf had upon him, when I called at his house on the evening after the murder. I have not seen him since then."

M'Lean tapped his pipe against the side of the mantelpiece, and then relit it.

"You still believe it was a murder?"

"Although I have no proof, I am decidedly of that opinion."

"Supposing that your theory is correct, and the man was murdered in your rooms, have you any reason to suspect anybody likely to commit such a crime—known or unknown to yourself?"

"I suspect nobody. The man lay dead in my chambers, and I believe he met his death by foul means—otherwise, why should he be there? As the

police have failed to find any clue to the mystery, it is not likely I should do so."

"But was there any clue to follow?"

"None whatever, so far as the perpetrator of the deed was concerned. The verdict at the inquest was an open one, and even the jury—after hearing all the evidence—were unable to give a definite statement as to the cause of death."

"So it may not have been a murder after all."

"My dear Athol! How did that body get into my rooms—and for what purpose? How was it removed to the empty chambers downstairs—and by whom? There are dozens of questions I could ask, and which at present cannot be answered. If it was not murder, it was suicide, or a sudden death of some sort. Cannot you see the hopeless tangle of facts which cannot be explained?"

M'Lean nodded his head thoughtfully.

"Granted. But that is pre-supposing that your story regarding the presence of the dwarf and the body in your room is true. I do not want in any way to cast unfair doubt upon the accuracy of your statements, but—but I am still inclined to agree with the police and Doctor Bransby."

"Do you mean to suggest I was lying all through my evidence, both before and after the inquest?"

"No, I do not. But I think you were very highly strung at the time, and that what you honestly think took place never occurred at all."

"But I am prepared to swear it did take place."

The artist turned a critical glance upon his friend. Even in the half light he could see how desperately worried and ill he looked.

"Look here, Lawrence. Have you come to ask for my advice?"

"Yes."

"Then it is that you should try and forget the whole thing. Don't let it bother you, man. Come out of your shell, and take some interest in life. Why not go in for that job of Christopher Moreland's? It may turn out a good thing, and it would anyhow be better than the existence you are living now. Why, if you go on brooding over this wretched affair, you will either be in a madhouse or in the Thames before the month is out. The game is not worth the candle. Take my word for that. You have evidently had a shock, and a nasty one too, but I think it is far more due to the letter you received from Miss Rossitter than to any visits from dwarfs and uncomfortable corpses. Look here. What are you doing to-morrow afternoon?"

"I am doing nothing. I tell you I have no engagements, professional or otherwise, and I am going to the devil as fast as I can."

"Then you had better alter your line of route as soon as possible," M'Lean said. "Come with me to a very dull and fashionable At Home to-morrow instead. It will bore you to tears, but that is better than moping in those chambers of yours. Will you come?"

"I do not mind going with you," Clayton replied, "but I certainly shall not go by myself."

"Good. Then that is settled. I will call for you at about two o'clock, and we will have a scratch lunch somewhere. Then we will be virtuous and betake ourselves to Grosvenor Square."

As the friends parted at the door of M'Lean's studio, Clayton felt a hand rest lightly upon his shoulder, and he heard his companion speaking in a more subdued voice than he had previously adopted.

"Look here, my dear Lawrence, I am going to speak pretty straight to you, and I hope you will take my advice. You just chuck that rotten profession of yours, at any rate for a time, and get into some new environment and among more stimulating surroundings. You are run down—badly run down—and your immediate prospects do not appear to be particularly inspiring. Go in for that appointment of Moreland's. He sounds a decent sort of fellow, and I have heard he has any amount of money. I do not know what the work would be, but he will stump up the dollars right enough, and it will give you the change you want—in more ways than one."

They gripped hands in the darkness.

"Perhaps you are right," Clayton said wearily. "My present life is a hell of torment, and I would take on any job to get away from it. Your advice is good, Athol, and I will look up Moreland in a day or two, but I expect the appointment is gone by this time—and to a better man."

"Well. We all have to take our luck in the labour market," M'Lean said with a short laugh. "I hope you will not be too late to secure yours. Anyhow, we shall meet to-morrow at two o'clock, and after lunch we will go to this bean-feast of the high and mighty in Grosvenor Square. Good-night, old man."

"Good-night."

CHAPTER IX

WHAT Athol M'Lean had called "a scratch lunch" proved to be a very tempting and appetizing meal indeed. The artist was a man who knew his London well, and had no sympathy for those people—with more income than brains—who wasted their money at expensive hotels and restaurants where they paid exorbitantly for things they did not want, and left with their stomachs uncomfortably full, and their pockets unpleasantly empty. Clayton acknowledged to his friend that he had enjoyed himself immensely—this condition of mind being due not so much to the mere gratification of his animal hunger, but rather to the nearness of a sympathetic chum, and the sound of a sympathetic voice. He had felt very lonely and dispirited during those days and nights spent in silent solitude. More than once during the repast he decided to try and persuade M'Lean to give up the fashionable assembly to which they were going, and to return with him to his chambers, but, whenever he approached the subject, he was met by the reply that he would enjoy himself as much as anybody—and probably more than most of the other guests—when once he got there.

"Don't you worry yourself so much about details,"

M'Lean said, as their cab slowed down behind a magnificent landau which had stopped in front of one of the most imposing mansions in Grosvenor Square. "This is the sort of thing you require as a mental tonic. It is not always pleasant to take, but it does you all the good in the world, so long as you do not over-do the dose. You have been brooding too much over private troubles, and your thoughts need distraction from the subject of yourself. You can slip off from this place as soon as you like."

While Clayton ascended the broad staircase, and, after being introduced to his hostess, entered the crowded reception rooms, he made up his mind that a very small dose of this form of tonic would go a long way with him. The heat, the noise, and the crush of guests who were either just arriving or—like himself—keeping a watchful eye upon the nearest means of escape, added to his feeling of restlessness. He felt out of place among these people and in his present mood. From somewhere in the distance, at a spot he could not locate, he heard weird sounds from a violincello, and, by straining his neck almost to dislocation, he managed to see part of the towsled head of an esctatic musician, moving from side to side like a deserted rook's nest in a stormy wind. Once more his eyes sought the door in seach of M'Lean, but his friend was at that moment being walked off by a severe lady in a pale green costume which boasted of neither collar nor sleeves, and he soon lost sight of them in the throng. He groaned audibly as a pointed heel rested with unerring certainty and precision upon his

toe, and he gave one more longing look in the direction of freedom.

As he did so, he noticed the tall figure of a girl who had but recently entered the room, and he gave a start of pleasure and surprise, while a quick flush came to his face. She was watching him, and, as soon as their eyes met, she gave him a smile of recognition, and a glance which invited him to come to her side. The social Inferno at once became changed to a Paradise in Clayton's estimation, for the girl was Verna Rossitter, and he saw she wished him to join her.

With a most amazing agility he pressed through the chattering crowd, whose whole thoughts were at that moment centred upon the necessity of vigorously applauding the efforts of the musician whom they had neither seen nor heard. Presently he found himself near enough to clasp the slim hand which was held out to him.

"You are the last person I should expect to meet in a crush like this," she said in a low voice. "What brings you here? You look terribly bored, and I have no doubt you feel so."

Clayton smiled.

"You are perfectly correct in your last surmise," he said. "In answer to your question, I am as much surprised as you are that I am here. I came as a matter of duty to a friend, and—for once—duty has been rewarded. But do let us get out of this bear garden. Is there no place where we can go and talk? There are any amount of things I want to ask you—and tell you."

She led the way out on to the crowded landing,

and they slowly made their way downstairs through the throng of new arrivals pressing upwards. After passing through a spacious apartment in which refreshments were being served to hungry and thirsty guests, they came to a door, hidden from the public gaze by a tall screen.

"I do not think we shall be disturbed in here," Verna said, with a backward smile at the man behind her. "I know the house well, for Cora Desmond is a great friend of mine. There. Now, if you will ring the bell, it is possible we may be able to attract the notice of one of the servants, and get some tea."

The apartment in which they found themselves was a sort of antechamber, between the dining-room and the billiard - room. Through an open door beyond him Clayton could see the wide green surface of a table, with the balls ready in position for a game of snooker. He pressed the bell beside the fireplace, and then turned to the girl beside him.

"Is your father here?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"No. He has not been well for some days, and I have been very anxious about him," she replied. "He had a sort of fit about a week ago, and the doctor will not let him leave his room."

"Ah. That was the night I was with him in Berkeley Square."

"You!"

Clayton bit his lip, for he saw that his visit to Myles Rossitter had been kept from his daughter, and he feared he had already said too much about

that unfortunate interview. Verna had seated herself in one of the low chairs, and looked up curiously at the tall figure of her companion.

"I did not know you had seen my father so recently," she said in a voice which invited some further explanation.

"I had to see him on—on business," Clayton said. "He appeared to have some sort of seizure while I was with him, and—well, I left him with his servant after sending for the doctor."

"He never told me that. Was the interview a private one?"

"Yes. It was."

The girl was slipping one hand out of her glove, and suddenly looked up. Her gaze flickered before his own, and she suddenly looked away.

"Was your visit in connection with that—that letter I wrote to you—I mean my last letter?"

"No. It had nothing to do with that."

"Was it of so private a nature that you cannot tell me the subject of your conversation? I have seen my father so little lately, for he must be kept as quiet as possible."

"I am afraid I am not at liberty to tell you anything about our interview that evening," Clayton said uncomfortably. "I would also suggest that you do not refer to it when you see Mr Rossitter. It would not do him any good in his present state of health to be reminded of it."

The girl was about to further interrogate her companion when, fortunately for him, the door opened and a footman entered the room.

"Will you please bring us some tea in here?"

Verna said. "If her ladyship asks for me, you will tell her where I am."

"Yes, Miss."

A few minutes later the man returned with a tray well furnished with all the delicacies which are considered indispensable at a fashionable London tea. Verna at once began to busy herself among the cups and saucers, after telling the footman that his services were no longer required. A sudden constraint had fallen upon the two young people, and they both felt glad that this welcome diversion had occurred. It was Clayton who broke the silence.

"Verna, I want some explanation to that letter you wrote me. I think it is my duty to ask for that, and yours to give it."

The girl leaned nervously forward in her chair, and the fair head drooped above the table in front of her. Clayton saw how the hands trembled, and his heart ached for her.

"I—I had to write it," she whispered, "and I have never hated myself so much in my life as when I did so."

"You had to write it—against your own wishes?"

"Yes."

"Your father made you?"

"Yes. He made me."

"Why?"

The head bent lower over the little table spread with delicate silver and china, and she did not answer. Clayton repeated his question.

"Why did he make you do such a thing? Does he not know that we love each other—that you are more to me than anything else in the world?"

Her answer sent the warm blood tingling through his veins.

"I told him that I love you, and—and, well, he made me write that letter. I have been miserable ever since."

"But what was his reason—beyond the fact that I am a wretched pauper, and you are, or will be, a very rich woman? I do not want you for what you have got. I want you for what you are—for yourself. The great wish of my life is to make some home worthy of you, and to be independent of your father's wealth. You have everything to lose by marrying me. I have everything to gain if I win you. I hate the thought of your fortune, for it has always seemed to be the one barrier between us." He leaned over her. "Verna, my darling, if I can get that home and if I ask you to share it with me—will you come?"

She raised her hands to her face, and he saw that her shoulders shook with sobs.

"No, no. Oh, it is impossible—quite impossible."

"Why should it be impossible?"

"Because my father tells me that—I must marry another man."

"Another man! Good God, is he going to sell you for a title?"

"No. It is not that—not that. But I have no choice in the matter."

"But why? This is a free country."

"Not for me," she whispered. "Oh, do not ask me why I had to write that letter! The idea of it was hateful to me, but—there was no alternative."

Clayton stood staring down in silence at the figure of the girl. He could not see her face. He was almost glad that it was so.

“It was torture to me to write it,” she sobbed.

“It was torture to me when I received it,” Clayton said grimly, “and the thought of it has been torture to me ever since. There is only one excuse I can imagine for your father’s conduct—only one.”

“And what is it?”

“He is trying to shield his honour—by sacrificing his daughter.”

As he spoke the words, Clayton was thinking of the bribe which had been offered to him by the dwarf. In some way it seemed that the man Harris had got Miles Rossitter in his power.

She looked up, and her face was wet with tears.

“I do not think that of him,” she said, “though I know nothing about his business affairs.”

Clayton gave an impatient jerk of his head.

“Is there any other man mixed up in this affair?” he asked.

She turned away, and a look of horror came over her face as she did so.

“Yes,” she replied, “there is.”

“Have you met him?”

“Yes.” The word was whispered with a shudder.

“Do you care for him?”

“No. Oh, how I loathe him!”

Then a ghastly thought came into Clayton’s mind—a thought which made him feel sick with fear and disgust.

“Verna! He is not deformed—not a dwarf?”

She started violently.

"You—you must not ask me! I cannot answer you," she replied with a shiver.

"Do you know his name?"

"Y-yes."

"Will you tell it to me?"

As she lifted her head, he could see the look of terror that lay behind the blue depths of her eyes.

"I will tell you, if you give me your sacred promise that you will respect my confidence."

"Yes, yes. I swear it. Verna, do not keep me in this suspense."

"His name is—*Christopher Moreland*."

Clayton sank back upon a chair. The dark clouds were closing round him very near. He felt the only thing he could do now was to leave himself in the hands of fate.

CHAPTER X

IT was the following morning, and Clayton sat alone in his chambers, waiting for the clients who never came. As a matter of fact, he did not expect any. He had reached the bed-rock of despair as far as his legal prospects were concerned, and had even ceased to curse the irony of fate which allowed other men—whom he knew to be his intellectual inferiors—to succeed, only on the strength of their self-advertisement and push, or maybe their servile surrender of principles to whichever political party happened to be in power. He realized very clearly that he would have to reconsider his present position from every point of view—and do it quickly. This was essential owing to his financial difficulties, which allowed of no delay in a speedy alteration of his prospects.

There was also the question of his love for Verna Rossitter, and her acknowledgment that his affection was reciprocated. He had thought a good deal about that sudden meeting and conversation he had had with the girl at the reception on the previous afternoon. It had opened out many new and important considerations with regard to the mystery with which he was so closely associated. The chief one of these was the undoubted fact that Myles Rossitter, Moreland, the dwarf Harris, and possibly the murdered man, were all known to each other.

He impatiently brushed upon one side the possibility of Verna being forced against her will to marry a man whom she obviously disliked. But why did she dislike Christopher Moreland? From the little he had seen of the man, Clayton was disposed to favour him rather than otherwise. Again, for what possible reason could the dwarf show such anxiety for himself—a complete stranger—to act as secretary to a man whom he hardly knew?

All these questions, with many others which were equally baffling, crowded through Clayton's brain as he sat there beside his table with his head sunk low in his hands. Yet they all pointed in one direction. Apart from his financial embarrassments, it was desirable for him to apply at once for the post which Moreland had at his disposal. It would not only secure for him some sort of a permanent salary, but it would also bring him into touch with those three men who had recently been so prominently in his thoughts. Incidentally, the appointment might afford him occasional opportunities of meeting the woman he loved.

He rose and walked to the window, looking out upon the dreary scene with unseeing eyes. He had but slight hope of securing the post. Some time had already passed since he first heard of it, and his luck was always so confoundedly bad that, under the most favourable conditions, he was pretty sure some other man would be the fortunate candidate chosen.

As he turned away from the window to fetch his hat and coat, he heard a sudden sharp knock at his

outer door. It was so loud and unexpected that he gave a nervous start, and hesitated before he answered the summons. A muttered expression of hope escaped from his lips as he did so—a hope that his visitor would not present the little distorted shape of the dwarf. The knock was repeated. This time with more insistence. Clayton crossed the room and opened the door.

To his surprise, he found himself face to face with the very man upon whom he was about to call—Christopher Moreland. He gave a sigh of relief, and shook the friendly hand which was held out to him.

“I am fortunate in finding you at home,” Moreland said, as he came slowly forward upon his sticks. “I have come early as my visit is really one of a business character, and I thought I should be more likely to find you disengaged now than if I called later in the day. May I come in?”

“Certainly,” Clayton replied, as he led the way into the room and drew a chair to the table. “Curiously enough, I was just about to start for Acton Chambers when your knock sounded upon the door. Had you been five minutes later, I fear we should have missed each other. What can I do for you?”

Moreland did not at once answer the question. He took the proffered chair, and placed his two sticks beside him against the table. While he did so he was looking round the room with an expression of interest which the occasion hardly seemed to justify. His eyes, however, presently returned to Clayton’s face.

“You were coming to see me?”

"Yes. That was my intention."

"And what was the object of your visit?"

"You will remember that when I called by mistake at your rooms a short time ago you mistook me for an applicant for the post of secretary which you were then advertising?"

"I remember the occurrence perfectly well," Moreland replied. "In fact the object of my being here now is to ask if you had forgotten it?"

Clayton's heart gave a sudden throb of surprise and hope.

"And my reason for wishing to see you this morning is to ask if the post is still vacant," he said.

"Yes. Unfortunately it is."

"Then will you allow me to apply for it? I do not know what the work would be nor whether I would suit you. But I would do my best to give every satisfaction."

Moreland shifted his position, and rose with some difficulty from his seat.

"May I take that chair by the window?" he asked. "I think I told you I have recently been through rather a severe operation, and I am not as strong as I used to be. These hard seats tire my back considerably."

Clayton hurried to draw the armchair forward, but his guest stopped him.

"No. Do not trouble to do that," he said. "I prefer to be near the window."

Had not Clayton's mind been so much given up recently to suspicions of several men, including his present guest, he might not have noticed the fact

that, by his change of position, Christopher Moreland sat with his back to the light, and his face was in shadow. The man certainly looked very ill, and the climb up the steep stairs had probably been too much for his strength.

"Have you come to see me upon the same matter?" Clayton asked anxiously. "I shall be most grateful if you will give me a chance of proving my worth as—your secretary."

Though the last words only stated a fact, the intonation of the voice implied a question. Moreland inclined his head slowly.

"The object of my visit here this morning is to find out if your professional engagements will allow you to accept my offer of the post."

Clayton gave a hard laugh.

"My present professional engagements are such as will allow me to accept anything," he replied. "I am sick of waiting for work which never comes. The best years of my life are still before me, and I do not want to spend them here, expecting clients who go elsewhere."

"As a constant occupation it does suggest the possibility of monotony," Moreland said dryly. "You have not found your profession a very profitable one, I fear."

"Profitable! Good Lord, I have been living on my capital most of the time, and now I have pretty well come to the end of it. Look here, Mr Moreland, I will be quite candid with you. It is a matter of the utmost importance that I should get some remunerative work at once. Will you give me a chance?"

"There is no reason why I should not," Moreland answered. "But before I make you any definite offer I should like to ask you one or two questions, and doubtless you will wish to know the nature of the work."

"Certainly."

Moreland extracted a small notebook and pencil from his pocket. Evidently he was a man of practical methods in his business affairs. Yet that room of his, into which Clayton had been, was certainly not the room of a business man.

"How old are you?"

"I was thirty-two years old last month."

"You can give some references, I suppose?"

"I have very few friends, but I know they will speak up for me."

"Where were you educated?"

"At Winchester and Cambridge."

"Have you done any secretarial work before?"

"Occasionally, but only in a small way."

"Have you any relatives to whom I can refer, should I wish to do so?"

"As far as I know, I have not got a relation in the world. I believe some cousins of my father have settled in Australia, but I do not know anything about them, and they would be useless for any such purpose."

"Then I conclude you are a bachelor?"

"Yes."

"If it is not an impertinent question, may I ask if you intend to remain so?"

Clayton hesitated. If the question was not impertinent, he could not see what it had to do with

the matter they were discussing. Besides, had not Verna told him on the previous afternoon that her father wished her to marry the man who was now before him?

"That is a difficult question to answer," he replied. "I suppose few men—if any—reach my age without having wished at some time or other to marry and have a home. In my case, it is at present impossible for me to do so, for the reasons I have already given you."

"But supposing you had sufficient means?"

"That is a contingency which is so remote, that it does not require consideration," Clayton replied, with a touch of impatience in his voice.

"I hope not," Moreland said pleasantly, as he closed the book in his hand and replaced it in his pocket. "Now let me tell you the nature of the work which my secretary would have to perform. It will not be very arduous, but it will need care and tact, and of course implicit obedience to my instructions." He paused, as though expecting Clayton to make some remark, but in this he was disappointed.

"Before my recent operation, I was a comparatively strong man, and I had therefore no need for a secretary. I now find that any prolonged exertion is too great a tax upon my health, and it is necessary I should have somebody with me to undertake the duties I am unable to perform myself."

Again he paused, and, as Clayton began to fear that a prolonged silence on his own part might imply a lack of interest in the subject they were discussing, he asked:

"And what are those duties?"

"I will tell you. But, in the first place, you must clearly understand that I am not a very wealthy man, so I cannot offer you any exorbitant salary. I shall require you to live at my house in the country during most of the year. During the short periods I spend abroad, your time would be your own. Your work would consist of relieving me of the burden of keeping up a fairly large establishment, answering my letters, and generally making yourself useful to me in any way I wish. I do not think you would find me a hard task-master."

"No. I am sure I should not."

All the time while Moreland had been speaking, Clayton was asking himself the question—"Why is this post being offered to a stranger, when there must be plenty of fellows—known to the man in front of me—who would accept the offer without hesitation?" For the first time, a thought which was hardly a suspicion, crossed his mind, that there was something being kept back from him which it was not to Moreland's interest to explain.

"Thank you. The salary I am offering with the post is five hundred pounds a year, and of course you would board and sleep in the house."

Again there fell a long silence between them. Although Christopher Moreland's face was in shadow, Clayton saw that he was being closely watched and he resented the fact. The only other man who had regarded him in this way had been—curiously enough—his last visitor, the dwarf Harris. He also noted that his present guest was occupying the same chair on which he had left

the dwarf asleep when he had gone to summon the police on the night of the murder. Both facts were odd coincidences, especially as the two men were known to each other, and were neighbours.

"Your terms are very generous ones," he said presently. "Even if they were the reverse, I am not in a position to refuse them, should you consider me a suitable candidate for the post. If you decide to make use of my services, when would you wish me to start work?"

"As soon as possible. How long will it take you to settle up your present arrangements here?"

"Not more than a week, at the outside."

Moreland rose painfully from his seat, and took his hat and gloves from the table.

"Are there any questions you would like to ask me?" he said, as Clayton handed him his sticks.

There was one question which was upon the tip of Clayton's tongue, but he refrained from putting it into speech. He would have liked to get some information with regard to this man's association with Myles Rossitter and his daughter, but he did not wish to appear interested in a matter upon which he was supposed to be ignorant. Such action might jeopardize his chances of securing the coveted post, and surely the future would afford him ample opportunities of finding out the truth under more favourable circumstances.

"I think not. Thank you. But I shall be grateful if you will let me know your decision as soon as you can conveniently do so. It will make a lot of difference to me if you decide to give me this appointment."

"You shall hear from me in the course of the next few days. As a matter of formal business, I shall write to any gentlemen whose names you give me for reference."

"I will let you have them now," Clayton said, and he wrote the names and addresses of Athol M'Lean and another person upon a blank envelope, which he took from his desk. "Both of these men are old friends of mine, and they can give you all the information you desire."

Moreland slipped the envelope into his pocket, and walked slowly to the door, leaning heavily upon his sticks. Clayton, who felt more than a passing interest in the man, accompanied him downstairs, to where a cab was waiting beside the pavement. The caretaker was at that moment coming up the stone steps, and she stood on one side to let them pass. As she did so, she curtsied to Clayton, who was a favourite of hers, and looked at his companion curiously.

"Well. Good-bye, Mr Clayton," Moreland said, as he slowly stepped into the cab. "I hope I have not taken up too much of your time. You will hear from me shortly, and I trust the result of our conversation this morning will be mutually satisfactory."

"Many thanks. Good-bye."

As Clayton turned to re-enter the house, the caretaker approached him from a dark corner where she had been waiting, and touched him upon his arm.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she said, pointing with a wizen finger in the direction of the vanishing cab. "Can you tell me who that gentleman is?"

Is he a friend of yours—or did he call on business?"

Clayton laughed good-humouredly. Had any other person in her position expressed such an interest in his private affairs he would have resented the impertinence.

"He came on business," he replied. "Why do you ask, Mrs Barrett?"

She stepped a few inches nearer to where he stood, and whispered up in a husky voice.

"I have seen that gentleman in this house before to-day," she answered mysteriously.

"I think you are making a mistake," Clayton said. "This is the first time he has been to my rooms."

The old woman shook her head.

"I remember the occasion well enough," she whispered. "I was scrubbing the floor of the first landing, and I had to make room to let him pass. He was as near to me then as he was just now, and I am making no mistake."

"Where did he go to?"

"I just managed to hear his steps go up the stairs, and they stopped outside your rooms. You were out at the time, sir, but he was up there for the best part of ten minutes. Then he came down, and passed me a second time. I am making no mistake."

"You know you are a bit deaf and short of sight," Clayton said, rather surprised at the woman's persistence. "Had he done what you say, he would either have written to me afterwards, or have mentioned the fact when he was with me to-day. It is possible that somebody did call, as you say, while I was out, but he was probably a touting

agent, or perhaps a fellow asking for charitable subscriptions. I sometimes get men of that sort."

She looked uneasily up at Clayton, and moved a step nearer to him.

"Why did he not write, and let you know his business?" she asked with a shrewd look.

"My good woman, for the simple reason he had no business to write about. I assure you that, to my knowledge, this gentleman has never been inside the house before to-day."

She shook her head again, more emphatically than ever.

"Very well, sir. Perhaps you are right and I am wrong, but I thought I would just let you know. That is all. No offence meant, I assure you, sir."

"Look here, Mrs Barrett," Clayton said, as he paused on the first step of the stairs. "You are very mysterious to-day. What is the meaning of it? If you have—or think you have—anything to tell me about the gentleman, I wish you would speak out, and let me know what it is."

"It may be only a coincidence, sir," she said, dropping her voice, "but the day when that gentleman went up to your rooms, was the day before the body of that poor man was found here in the empty chambers."

Clayton started at the earnestness of the old woman's manner, but she had turned away and did not see the movement.

"I still think you have made a mistake," he said gravely. "That terrible event has got upon our nerves a good deal lately, and we are inclined to be

too ready to jump to conclusions. You must try and forget all about the gruesome affair."

Mrs Barrett glanced back at him, though she had not heard his remarks.

"Perhaps you are right, sir. Perhaps you are right. But—I have not made no mistake."

CHAPTER XI

BEFORE the end of the week, Clayton received the eagerly expected letter from Christopher Moreland. He read it through carefully more than once, as though he could not believe that such a stroke of luck could have come his way at last. The letter was short and to the point. It stated that if Clayton still desired the vacant post of secretary, he could have it upon the terms already discussed between them at their last interview. Any alterations as to details could be arranged, if necessary, after he had made himself acquainted with the nature and scope of the work. Moreland also added that he was sure it would be to their mutual advantage if the engagement in the first place was understood to last for a month's trial. He hoped Clayton would make it convenient to be ready to take up his new duties at the end of the month, and they would journey down to the country together.

This letter reached its recipient late in the afternoon, and, as soon as Clayton had posted off an answer of willing acceptance, and enjoyed a hasty meal, he hurried off to Chelsea to talk the matter over with his friend, Athol M'Lean. He found the artist busy at his table, with a lamp beside him, drawing charcoal sketches which he called "notes" for one of his next Academy pictures.

"I have got that appointment all right," Clayton said cheerily, as he seated himself in a low chair near his friend, and filled his favourite pipe. "I only heard of my luck this evening, and—by Jove—it has made a new man of me already."

M'Lean stretched out a great hand and rested it upon his chum's shoulder with no light weight.

"I am delighted to hear it," he said. "You want a change badly, and I hope this one will turn out a trump card for you. You have had a long spell of bad luck lately, old man. Let us hear all about it."

So Clayton told his friend all that he could remember about the conversation he had had with his new patron, and M'Lean sat and puffed great clouds of smoke up to the ceiling—and listened in silence. When his guest had finished his story, the artist drew a blank sheet of paper towards him upon the table, and began to sketch fancy heads of girls upon it. His silence was so prolonged that Clayton grew impatient.

"Well, Athol, give me your opinion. What do you think of it?"

"It sounds all right—so far," M'Lean said. "Have you got the terms upon paper, and signed by Moreland himself?"

"They are mentioned in detail in his letter to me, and the letter is signed. Here it is, so you can read it for yourself."

He drew a paper from his pocket and handed it across the table. M'Lean read it over more than once before he returned it to its owner.

"Again I repeat—it seems all right. But—"

"But—what?"

"I cannot make out why a good job like this—and mind you it is a good job if the man is straight—should be offered to *you*. Christopher Moreland must have plenty of friends and relations to select from before offering it to a complete stranger—like yourself. Has not that idea struck you?"

"Yes, it has," Clayton replied. "But I am not sure I would not do the same thing in a similar position. If I had a private appointment of this kind to offer, I would much rather have a stranger about me than a friend or a family connection. The relation between us would be more satisfactory in every way, and purely a business one."

"But I fail to understand the attitude of Harris, the dwarf, in this matter," Athol said. "If you will forgive me for repeating the fact, I still do not give any support to that yarn about his visit to your rooms, nor to the finding of a dead body there. I look upon it as the fabrication of an over-excited brain. No. Do not interrupt me," he added, as Clayton leaned forward to expostulate. "The fact which I cannot get over is this. Why, in the first place, did the dwarf stop you in front of Myles Rossitter's house and give you his card, and, incidentally, one of Moreland's as well? In the second place, what possible interest can he have either in you personally or in your acceptance of this post?"

"My dear Athol, if you refuse to accept the whole of my statement as to what happened upon that night, of course the mystery becomes more involved than ever. I admit there is a good deal I am unable to explain, but, in the light of what

I know to be facts, there is undoubtedly some bond of interest between the dwarf, Rossitter, and Christopher Moreland, the key to which is held by Harris. He hopes that if I accept this post he will be able to use me as his tool, though for what purpose I am unable to tell."

"But why—*you*?"

"Because he is an unscrupulous man with the brain of the devil. He saw me standing outside Rossitter's house, and he formed his deduction with marvellous accuracy. He did not know nor care who I was, but he guessed I might be the very man he sought."

"What was his deduction?"

"Men do not stand outside a house on a foggy November night merely for the purpose of amusement," Clayton replied. "When the house in question is that of a well-known millionaire, the circumstances of the case alter considerably."

"He surely did not think you were a burglar?"

"No. He is far too clever for that. Besides, burglars do not do such things. He decided that my presence there was due to the only other reasonable alternative. And he was right."

"What was the only other alternative?"

"That I was watching the window of the woman I love."

M'Lean gave a low whistle.

"Great Scot!" he exclaimed. "Now I begin to see daylight. Of course, if you were in love with Miss Rossitter, and he had a grudge against her father which he wished to gratify through their mutual friend, Moreland, you would be the best

man for the job. No, no. I am wrong there. How could the dwarf hurt Rossitter by the fact of you becoming Moreland's secretary? I am hanged if I can make head or tail of it. Look here, old fellow, we must have a drink. This prolonged process of mental calculation is too severe a tax upon my brain. Help yourself."

He fetched a tray of refreshment from the side-board, and poured a moderate allowance of spirits into a tumbler, which he filled with water, after Clayton had obeyed his hospitable injunction.

"No, I give it up," the artist said, as he replaced his glass upon the table. "There seems to be no beginning nor end to the complications."

"I could help you a good deal to unravel the mystery if I were free to do so—but my lips are sealed."

"Do you mean to tell me that you have solved all these problems?" M'Lean asked in astonishment. "Well, you are a cleverer man than I took you for, and you deserve an even better job than the one you are taking on now. How did you find them out?"

"I have by no means discovered the most important points in the solution, but I have got hold of the key which I believe will eventually open the door that conceals the mystery."

"But that is your secret?"

"Yes. I have given my word not to repeat it, and of course I must stick to my promise."

"May I ask to whom you gave your promise? Was it to Rossitter, to Moreland, or to the dwarf?"

"It was to neither. It was to Verna herself."

"Miss Rossitter!"

Clayton nodded.

"I met her at that reception you took me to in Grosvenor Square the other day, and what she then told me throws a very lurid light upon the whole affair. I cannot yet explain even my own thoughts and suspicions, but the fact of becoming Moreland's secretary will considerably help to clear up the mystery. It is partly for that reason that I am going to take the appointment—though it is equally necessary that I should do so for my own sake."

"So you met Miss Rossitter at the Desmonds'! I thought you disappeared with suspicious alacrity, but concluded you had left the house because you were bored. Well, I hope you are duly grateful to me for having taken you there?"

"Indeed I am. By Jove, Athol! in spite of what she told me about this beastly affair, she has made me the happiest man in the world."

"The devil she has! Did she promise to marry you as soon as the banns have been read out at St Margaret's, Westminster?"

"No. She did not do that. But I do not care what happens now, so long as I can win a home worthy of her. It will be a waiting game, but the years soon pass when there is something—or somebody—worth waiting for."

It was late when Clayton reached his chambers, and he bounded up the stairs with a lightness of heart and step which he had not felt for many a long day. He had walked all the way back from Chelsea, and the exercise had brought to him a

pleasing sense of healthy exhaustion. On reaching his landing, he was surprised to find that the door of his room was open and the lamp lighted. With a sudden quickening of his pulse, he entered the apartment and, as he did so, he noticed a faint, musky odour in the air. With an exclamation of astonishment and anger, he found that it was not empty.

Upon the big chair beside the window, he saw the huddled-up figure of the dwarf, and he was apparently asleep.

"What the devil are you doing here?" he exclaimed in a loud voice, "and how did you get in?"

The dwarf slowly began to uncoil himself, and presently assumed a more natural position.

"Not so loud, my dear Mr Clayton," he whispered. "Please, not so loud. I am not deaf, and I was not asleep. I am only resting my eyes from the very trying light of your lamp. Why do you not either invest in another kind of burner, or use candles? Candles are so much better for the eyes than this horrid glare."

"You have not answered my questions," Clayton replied angrily. "What are you doing here, and how did you get in?"

"You can surely see for yourself what the first answer is," the dwarf said, with a leer which was presumably intended to be friendly. "I am waiting to have a few words with you before you go to bed. As to your second question, the answer is equally obvious. I came in through the door."

"But it was not open."

"Pardon me. I could not have got into the room

had it been shut. I admit I am not of a tall stature, but I am not quite small enough to pass through the key-hole."

The leer widened upon the hairy lips, and Clayton felt an almost irresistible desire to take the little man in his arms, and throw him downstairs.

"Look here, Mr Harris," he said. "This interview is to be a short one, and it is also to be our last. I will give you ten minutes to explain the reason of your unwarrantable call here at this hour. I shall be glad if you will be as brief as possible, as I am tired, and I want to go to bed. At the end of the ten minutes, you will leave these rooms, either of your own free will—or without it."

"I shall leave these rooms when I have said all I have come to say," the dwarf answered coolly, "and not before. Fortunately for both of us, I only came here to ask you two questions, to which I shall be obliged if you will give me simple and straightforward answers."

"Confound your impudence!" Clayton exclaimed furiously. "I shall answer neither of your questions, and I deny your right to force your acquaintance upon me in this way. At our last meeting, I told you that I loathe the sight of you, and I never wished to see you again. How dare you come here to ask me questions? I have a great mind to—
to—"

He took a step forward, but the dwarf raised a heavy, wrinkled hand in protest.

"At any rate you can have no objection to hearing what my questions are," he said softly. "That cannot harm either of us, and they may be in-

structive to you, even if you decline to answer them."

"Damn you. Ask them then, and get out of this room as quickly as possible. There are not many of the ten minutes left."

"Good. My first question is this. Have you decided to accept the post of secretary to Christopher Moreland?"

"That is no business of yours," Clayton replied, "and I decline to answer it."

"But it *is* some business of mine," the dwarf said gently. "You forget it was I who put you in the way of applying for it."

"I received the offer of the appointment direct from Mr Moreland himself. Your connection with the transaction is another matter altogether. Whether I have accepted or refused the offer is no concern of yours. Now for your second question, and you had better make haste. Even my patience has a limit, and that limit is almost reached."

The eyes of the dwarf had narrowed to a thin line which was barely seen behind the heavy growth of hair which almost covered his cheeks and forehead. The creased hands were slowly rubbing his ungainly knees. He did not answer at once.

"What did you do with those diamonds?" he asked presently in a low voice.

Clayton started.

"What diamonds?"

"The diamonds you stole from the dead man in this room."

"You devil!" Clayton hissed. "You know as well as I do that I stole no diamonds from the

body." He gave a short laugh of contempt. "The last time I saw you, you denied all knowledge of having been in this room when I found the murdered man. How do you reconcile your statement then with your question now?"

"I am not going into that controversy," Harris replied blandly. "I am asking you a question. What did you do with those diamonds?"

"And I have already answered you. I neither sought nor found any diamonds upon the body. If there had been any there, I can pretty well guess what happened to them—after I left you alone with the corpse."

The dwarf did not appear in any way to resent this implied doubt as to his honesty. He slowly shifted himself from the chair to the ground, and began to move towards the door.

"I fear my ten minutes are over," he said. "I am more sorry for your sake than for my own that you have refused to answer my questions in the spirit in which they were asked. It now seems that, should the occasion arise, I can prove you are a thief—as well as a murderer. At the present moment, I hold your life and your honour in the palm of my hand."

Clayton took a step forward, and was about to seize the little deformity and throw him out of the room. But the dwarf had already reached the door, and he restrained himself. It was best to let his unwelcome guest depart without violence. His one desire was to get rid of him as quickly as possible.

As he crossed the threshold of the open door, Harris paused and looked back with an evil look in his eyes.

“I think your friend, Mr Athol M‘Lean, is a very pleasant sort of fellow,” he said, as he limped from the light into the darkness of the landing. “I wish you were half as agreeable. Please give him my respects when you next see him. He will become a great artist one of these days, and I hope he will reap his reward.”

“What the devil do you know about Athol M‘Lean?” Clayton called out. “My God! I believe you are Satan himself, clothed in an ill-fitting human garb. What do you know about him?”

But the figure of the dwarf had already disappeared down the narrow stairs, and the echo of his shuffling feet could be heard growing fainter in the distance.

Clayton shut and carefully locked the door. Then he began to walk slowly up and down the room, deep in thought.

“I wonder how that little fiend knows that Athol is a friend of mine?” he asked himself, “and how on earth did he find out that I had discovered any diamonds? His knowledge of the last fact, however, proves one thing, and that is that the murdered man was in possession of Rossitter’s diamonds sometime during the evening when the murder was committed.”

CHAPTER XII

"WE shall soon be there now."

It was Christopher Moreland who spoke, and he half turned in his seat to look at Clayton as he did so. They had motored down from London together after lunch, and the car had carried them well and fast. As soon as the last suburbs were left behind them, Clayton shook off the feeling of constraint which had possessed him ever since they started. He felt that his new life was now beginning in real earnest, and he could forget the hateful worries of the past. The clouds of his anxieties faded away, like the murky smoke that brooded over the great city in the distance. He knew not what fate the future held in store for him, but he did realize that he was now the recipient of a substantial salary, and he intended to save every possible shilling of it so as to enable him to offer himself once more to Verna Rossitter, and make himself independent of her father and his millions. Had he guessed what horrors and dangers lay ahead of him—involving not only himself but also the woman he loved—it is certain that he would have implored his present companion to turn the great car round, and hurry back to the wretched life of poverty and of hopeless endeavour which he had that day left behind him.

"What is the name of your estate?" he asked, as

the motor glided suddenly off from the main road and sped along a sandy track which lay in a straight line towards what looked like a large, open common.

"Are we still in Sussex?"

"It is not much of an estate," Moreland replied with a short laugh. "There is a good-sized house, and some nice gardens, and that is about all. It is a delightful place in the spring and summer, but not very inviting at this time of year. It is called 'The Nunnery,' which is hardly a suitable name for the home of a bachelor like myself."

"Why did you give it the name? If you wanted to preserve any ecclesiastical associations, you might have called it 'The Monastery.'"

"It had been known by that name for hundreds of years before I bought it, and—being a place of historic interest—I thought it a pity to alter it. They tell me it was originally a convent, and that all sorts of atrocities have been committed there at different times. I have never been able to find out definitely what really did take place, beyond a massacre of nuns who refused to submit to Cromwell's men. Of course, upon the strength of that and other probable fables, the house has the reputation of being haunted."

"That sounds interesting," Clayton said cheerily. "Have you ever been troubled with the ghost? I think I should like to see the spirit of an Abbess, or a Madonna-faced nun. It would be rather a soothing distraction during a restless night."

"Of course it is all nonsense," Moreland replied. "No. I have neither seen nor heard anything of the kind, though I believe I am unusually sensitive to

such influences. But I have only lived here in the summer, and these manifestations are made during the dreary months of the year." He paused for a moment, and strained his eyes into the gathering gloom of the misty evening. "Do you know where we are now?"

"No. I have not the faintest idea. The country about here does not look very inviting. Where are we?"

"We are just going to enter Ashdown Forest, which in summer is one of the most lovely spots in England. I fear you see it now under the least favourable circumstances. It is not always like this. It is full of great open spaces, which in the spring are full of mating birds, and carpeted with flowers. The forest itself is a fairyland of beauty, and contains many delightful walks and drives. Unfortunately, the neighbourhood is becoming known to trippers, and fashionable hotels are being built, with their golf links and their garages, and other barbarous attractions. I am glad to say The Nunnery is well off the beaten track, and I am not troubled with the terrible people who desecrate the beauties of Nature whenever they get an opportunity for doing so."

The mist was too dense for Clayton to see anything beyond the immediate surroundings through which they were passing. But the dreary prospect did not diminish his good spirits. He knew that the country always does look dismal on damp November evenings, and he was sufficiently of an artist at heart to picture how transformed the scene would be with a clear blue sky overhead, and the golden sheen of

a summer sun shedding its lustre upon frond and fern, and a breeze gently stirring the lacework of leaves into delicate traceries of light and shadow. He was determined only to look upon the bright side of things on this occasion. He was even prepared to make himself pleasant to the ghost of the Lady Abbess, should she favour him with a nocturnal visit. He would prefer her to the Madonna-faced nun. It would be so much less compromising.

There came a sudden swing of the car round a corner, and Clayton saw the dim lights of windows, flickering through bare trees a few hundred yards ahead of him. They passed a little lodge, which suddenly appeared out of the gloom, and as suddenly disappeared again, and then they spun up what looked like an old-fashioned carriage drive.

"Here we are," Moreland said, as he prepared to unpack himself from the heavy fur rug which covered their knees. "It will be nice to reach some light and warmth after the drive, and I do not think a hot drink would do us any harm."

The car slowed down under a massive stone portico, and, as it did so, the great doors swung open before them. Through the haze of light which flooded the steps, Clayton saw the tall, dark figure of a man advance towards them. He at once recognized him as the foreign servant whom he had seen at Moreland's flat in London.

With the dexterity of a well-trained attendant, he found his master's sticks and handed them to him. Then he helped him out of the carriage and up the steps. Clayton followed them into the house, and, as he stepped into the vast, dim hall, the same

feeling of unreality came over him which he had experienced on more than one occasion during the last few weeks. Having divested himself of his outer coat and wraps, Clayton followed his host into a great oak-panelled chamber, where a bright fire blazed in a massive stone grate, and every article of furniture suggested comfort and repose. The servant was about to retire, but Moreland called him back.

“Emile !”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are there any letters for me ?”

The man stepped quickly to the carved writing-table, and taking up a pile of envelopes and papers, placed them upon a small Japanese stool beside the sofa where his master was sitting.

“Thank you. Now will you bring us some hot drinks and a few dry biscuits ? It is too late to have anything that will spoil our appetites, for we dine at eight o’clock.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Will that suit you ?” Moreland asked, as he turned to his new secretary.

“Perfectly,” Clayton answered, surprised at such consideration being shown by an employer towards a paid official.

In a few minutes the man returned, bringing a tray with several decanters upon it, and a couple of silver embossed jugs of hot water. Having placed these near at hand, he silently left the room.

“Is there anything I can do for you now ?” Clayton asked, after he had sipped the boiling jorum of brandy and water which he had mixed for him.

self. "I should like to get into harness as soon as possible. Can I answer any of those letters this evening?"

"I do not think they are of any importance," Moreland answered. "The replies can quite well wait till to-morrow. We will not worry ourselves about business matters this evening. Perhaps you wish to see your room. Would you like my servant to unpack your things?"

"No, thanks. I would much rather do so myself. Then I know where everything is. If your man will show me where my room is, I will go and get the job done at once."

As he was emptying his tumbler the door opened and Emile stood upon the threshold awaiting orders. As Moreland had not moved from his seat, the effect was unpleasantly suggestive that the man had been listening outside the door. Possibly the surprised look upon Clayton's face betrayed his thoughts, but his host at once put his mind at rest.

"I have an electric bell upon the ground here," he said with a smile. "I have only to touch it with my foot. It saves me a lot of trouble. If you will follow Emile, he will show you the way to your room. I hope you will find everything you want there. If not, you must not hesitate to say so. I shall be here when you return."

Clayton followed the tall, thin figure of the man-servant across the hall and up a magnificent staircase. He could see but little of the splendour which surrounded him, for the mist from outside had got into the house and dulled the soft radiance of the lamps that stood in their silver sconces at intervals

upon the oaken bannisters. But he saw there was a great space above him, and, as he crossed a landing, he noticed the grey glint of armoured figures standing like sentinels in far corners. He wondered if these relics of by-gone days were the uniforms worn by the soldiers who played such havoc among the nuns! He passed cabinets of curious china and glass work, bronze and marble busts upon granite pedestals. High up upon the walls hung dim and shadowy portraits in richly carved frames. Above him he could just see the tattered draperies of old war flags and bannerets. Clayton was inclined to think that the Lady Abbess and her Madonna-faced nuns had not come off so badly after all.

A few steps further on Emile paused in front of a massive door, which he opened with surprising dexterity, seeing that the depth of the woodwork was many inches of solid oak. He stood on one side for Clayton to pass, and followed him as soon as he had done so.

“Your luggage will be up directly, sir,” he said. “You will find the boxes you sent in advance are in the next room—through that door, sir. They have been opened, but not unpacked.”

The apartment in which Clayton found himself was a large and comfortable one. The furniture was solid and luxurious, and the walls were covered with magnificent oak panelling. The fire in the grate sent a homely greeting to him with a ruddy glow across the quaint colours of the upholstery. As the door closed behind Emile, he crossed the room to the further apartment which opened out of it. Here he found the same thoughtful considera-

tion for his creature comforts. The room was presumably intended to be used as a study, and was perfectly adapted for such a purpose. The boxes he had sent in advance stood beside the windows awaiting his attention. He glanced round with a sensation of pleasure and of pride. How different it all was to the chambers he had left behind him in London! He shuddered as he thought of them and the associations which had recently made them so hateful to him. Then he heard steps advancing along the passage, and he returned to his bedroom.

“Come in.”

The door opened and Emile appeared, carrying the two Gladstone bags which had been brought in the car that afternoon. Clayton began to feel rather sorry for the ubiquitous Emile. Surely this work might have been done by a footman or by one of the grooms.

“Shall I unpack them for you, sir?” the man asked, thus giving the lie to Clayton’s former suspicions.

“No, thank you, I will do that myself. But I should like a candle here to light me back downstairs. I am sure I could not find my way without one.”

“There are candles upon the table outside your door, sir.”

Half an hour later, Clayton—having changed his clothes and put on a loose smoking coat—started to retrace his steps to the room where he had left his host. His bump of locality must have been singularly well developed, for he only lost his bearings twice. The third attempt brought him to the top

of the staircase which led to the hall below. Having placed his candle upon a table, he went to rejoin Moreland. However, when he opened the door, he found the room was empty, so he strolled to the fireplace with the intention of doing what every man does under similar circumstances—to stand with his back to the cheerful blaze and await the arrival of his host. As he reached the tiger skin, which did duty as a hearth-rug, he saw an envelope lying upon it and stooped to pick it up. The side of the paper which was written upon was turned towards him, and his eyes rested upon it as he lifted it up. Then he paused, and a frown gathered upon his face.

The writing upon the envelope was that of Verna Rossitter.

For a few seconds he stood there in the ruddy firelight, with the envelope in his hand, staring at the writing which he knew so well. His back was towards the door, so he did not see nor hear it open. A slight movement behind him made him turn round, and he saw Christopher Moreland advancing towards him.

“You must have dropped this letter,” he said, holding it out in his hand. “I have just found it here upon the ground.”

Moreland took the envelope and, for an instant, the eyes of the two men met. The expression upon Moreland’s face was mask-like, but the frown had not yet left Clayton’s countenance.

Moreland glanced at the writing, and then tossed the letter upon the table beside him.

“Thank you,” he said. “It is from Miss Rossitter, the daughter of Myles Rossitter, at whose house I

think we have both visited. They are coming down here to spend Christmas and the New Year with me. Now, shall we go in to dinner? I am sure the drive must have given you an appetite, for we are proud of our air in Ashdown Forest."

As Clayton followed his host out of the room, he noticed that Moreland walked with less effort than he had done on any previous occasion when he had seen him. He only used one stick for a support, and the exertion of movement seemed to trouble him less.

"I hope he did not think I had been reading Verna's letter," he thought, as he took his seat at the table, where Emile was already in attendance. "It would be a bad beginning if he did. I suppose it was her reply to his invitation for Christmas."

CHAPTER XIII

THE breakfast gong had already sounded when, upon the following morning, Clayton entered the dining-room. He had enjoyed a long and refreshing sleep, and felt in the best of spirits. The day was bright with wintry sun, and the view which stretched in front of him through the long French windows was, to his mind, a very pleasing one to look upon. The garden, like the building, was old-fashioned in every respect, and contained no modern innovations. Low box hedges outlined the paths, and at each corner of the small lawns rose a dark tapering cypress, which stood, sentinel like, above the gorgeous autumn tinted leaves that the wind had scattered over the grass. Here and there the beds were still bright with the last surviving flowers of the year, and in the centre of the garden stood an ancient stone basin, from the middle of which rose the figure of a child, holding aloft a cornucopia which looked like a torch, but which probably served as a fountain during the summer months. To anyone who had not spent most of his life in London, the scene might have appeared somewhat depressing, though there was an old-world charm and peace about it which would have proved singularly attractive to any lover of nature.

As Clayton turned from the window, the door

opened, and Emile entered the room. Having placed a couple of covered dishes upon the sideboard, and cast a critical glance at the arrangement of the table, he was about to retire.

"Mr Moreland sends his compliments, sir," he said, as he paused upon the threshold. "And he hopes you will excuse him. He has had a restless night, and is having his breakfast in his room."

"I am sorry to hear that," Clayton said. "Will you tell him I shall be ready to see him as soon as he comes downstairs? After breakfast, I shall take a stroll in the garden, so it will not be difficult to find me."

"Yes, sir. Mr Moreland said he would be pleased if you will join him in the library at twelve o'clock."

"Very well, I shall be there at that time."

"Is there anything else I can fetch you, sir?"

Clayton looked at the well spread table and sideboard, and smiled as he shook his head.

"No, thank you, I am sure I shall find all that I want here."

While Clayton was enjoying an excellent meal, and satisfying the pangs of an unusually keen appetite, he happened to glance at the centre-piece upon the table. It was a massive silver rose bowl and, upon closer inspection, he noticed that it was engraved with a crest surmounted by an earl's coronet. He suddenly remembered having seen the same crest and coronet upon the writing utensils in Moreland's London flat. On examining the spoons and forks beside him, he found they were all adorned with the same emblem. Clayton had never interested himself in the subject of heraldry, but he

thought it strange that a coronet should be found upon the silver of a man who was not a peer of the realm. However, he dismissed the matter from his mind, and proceeded to do full justice to the good things that had been provided for him.

As soon as he had finished his meal, he lit his pipe and found his way out into the garden. The first object that attracted his attention and interest was the house itself. It was a good sized building, and had evidently passed through several periods of restoration. It was square and compact in shape, and the colour of the stone walls bore eloquent testimony to its antiquity. Only one portion of it appeared to be modern, and that was a wing which had been built on to it at one side. In Clayton's opinion, it spoiled the effect of what would otherwise have been a splendid survival of ancient architecture. It seemed as much out of place as did the coronet upon the silver he had left behind him upon the dining-room table.

He passed from the garden of lawns and flowers through a wooden door, let into the stone wall, and found himself in a lesser enclosure which was devoted to the more useful though less artistic service of fruit and vegetables. In the distance he saw a man stooping over the ground, weeding. Thinking this a good opportunity of obtaining some information about the neighbourhood, he went towards him, and halted at his side. Evidently the man had not heard his approach, for he went on with his work in an automatic way, and took no notice of the newcomer.

“I suppose this is a busy time of year for men

like you," Clayton said, "though in a big place like this there must always be plenty to do."

The man continued his weeding, and did not answer. His back was towards the path, and he appeared to be engrossed with his work. Clayton repeated his former remarks, with a note of impatience in his voice. But still the man took no notice of his presence. Evidently he was either very deaf or very stupid.

"Do you happen to have a match upon you?" Clayton asked in a loud voice. "I have left my box indoors."

But the man went on working as though no one had addressed him.

Then Clayton touched him upon the arm, and at once he straightened himself, looking round with a start of surprise.

"Are you deaf?" Clayton shouted. "Why don't you answer me?"

A foolish smile came to the man's face, and he shook his head. At the same time he pointed to his mouth and ears.

"Poor fellow," Clayton muttered as he turned away. "He is a deaf mute. Well, this is certainly a very charming place to live in, but—but I think it is a bit uncanny. No wonder Moreland only comes down during the summer. By the way, I wonder why he has asked the Rossitters here for Christmas, and what Verna will think of it!"

Punctually at twelve o'clock Clayton presented himself at the library. He found Moreland reclining upon the sofa, with a small table drawn close beside him, upon which were strewn many papers. He

looked up with a nod of greeting as he saw who had entered the room.

"Good day," he said pleasantly. "I was sorry not to join you at breakfast this morning, but I had a shocking night, so I hope you will excuse me. That motor drive from London shook me up a good deal—more than I realized at the time—and I do not think I am yet strong enough to do such things. I hope you are none the worse for the trip?"

"On the contrary," Clayton replied, "I had a splendid night, and feel as fresh as paint this morning." He drew a chair to the table as he spoke, and sat down. "Now you must let me start work. I am sure there are any amount of those letters I could answer for you."

"Yes. There are a fair number. Can you write shorthand?"

Clayton nodded.

"I am not much of a hand at it, but I think I can write it fast enough for any purpose of this kind."

"Good. Then I will dictate the answers, and then perhaps you will take them to your room and prepare them for me. I hope everything has been arranged for your comfort upstairs?"

"Nothing could be better," Clayton replied. "It is awfully good of you to make things so easy and pleasant for me."

During the next half hour Clayton sat and took down the answers to the pile of letters upon the table beside him. The work was by no means a severe strain upon his efforts, and it struck him

more than once that a considerable number of the replies he wrote were altogether unnecessary. Perhaps, however, his employer was testing his ability before he gave him other, and more important, work.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked, when at length he rose from his seat, with a large sheaf of letters and answers in his hand. "I want to justify my position as your secretary as much as possible."

"Thank you. There is nothing more at present. In a few days we shall be more busy, as I have to make the necessary arrangements for my guests."

"Do you expect a large party?"

"No. There will be my cousin, Lord Orsett, and his sister—Lady Anna, who acts as hostess. Also Mr Myles Rossitter and his daughter. I shall have to invite two more ladies to make up even numbers, but there is plenty of time for that. Probably Lady Anna will ask if she may bring a couple of friends. She usually does so."

"Well, I will bring these letters to you when they are ready. Shall I find you here?"

"Yes. But—stop a minute," Moreland said, as Clayton was about to leave the room. "There is one matter which I wish to bring to your notice, and, having done so, we need not refer to it again. It is with regard to my staff of servants here. Have you met any of them about the place?"

"Only your man, Emile," Clayton replied, "and—yes—by the way, I did come across one of your gardeners this morning."

"Did you notice anything unusual about him?"

"Yes. The poor fellow was a deaf mute."

"I do not suppose you will meet any of my other indoor servants," Moreland said slowly, "but, if you do, you will find they are all suffering from the same infirmities."

Clayton almost dropped his bundle of papers with astonishment.

"Do you mean to say that all your servants are deaf mutes?"

"All—except Emile and his wife, who is my housekeeper."

"But how on earth do you get on? What a ghastly idea!"

"I get on far better than I should do if they could hear and speak," Moreland replied. "They all do their work like machines, and they do it exceedingly well. There is only one other peculiarity about them."

"What is that?"

"There is not one of them who can either read or write."

"Good God! They are not imbecile?" Clayton exclaimed with a shudder. He began to wonder if, by the bribe of a high salary, he had been lured into some sort of a private asylum.

"They are a great deal more sane than a good many of the people one meets in these days," Moreland said dryly. "I doubt if you would find in all England one single establishment in which the domestic arrangements work with more perfect ease and regularity than in this one. It is like clock-work. Each man and woman knows exactly what

his or her work is, and that work is performed without any of the petty discords and worries that disturb other houses. My own personal wants are attended to by Emile, and he will also wait upon yourself. His wife acts as maid to any ladies who happen to stay in the house. But as I very rarely entertain any parties here, her services are seldom required in that capacity."

"Do your servants mix together at all? How do they manage for companionship?"

"As I never visit the servant's hall, I am unable to answer that question. They appear perfectly contented."

"But how do they make their wants known—even to Emile?"

"They have no wants. They receive good wages, and their work is not excessive. If they could write or speak, I have no doubt they would, without exception, express their satisfaction of the posts they hold. For people in their unfortunate position, I think they ought to be exceedingly thankful for the good fortune which has placed them in my service."

"It is the most extraordinary situation I ever heard of," Clayton said.

"It is not half so extraordinary as it sounds, although I admit it is an unusual one. After you have been here a few days, you will forget that there is any difference between my servants and those in other houses you visit. At any rate, I am sure you will not observe any."

As soon as Clayton reached his apartments upstairs he threw the bundles of papers upon the

nearest table and, having lit his pipe, began to walk thoughtfully up and down the room. He had an unpleasant feeling that everything was not as it should be in this silent house of mystery. Certainly no man could be more kind or considerate for his welfare than his employer, but he hated the idea of being surrounded by persons who could neither hear nor speak, who—in spite of what Moreland had just told him—he suspected were half witted. Of course there was some reason for engaging these unfortunate people. No man in his senses would think of such a thing unless there was a motive for doing so. What was that motive?

Then, with a feeling of distrust and uneasiness, he remembered that Verna Rossitter and her father were expected at The Nunnery shortly. What would the girl think of such an establishment—she who was so healthy minded and well balanced? Did she know the sort of place she was coming to? Would she come if she did know? Ought he not to write and warn her? But warn her of what? She had told him it was her father's wish she should marry Moreland. Was it not likely that Rossitter was bringing her down in order that the definite engagement should take place?

Clayton ground his teeth with a suppressed oath as he thought of this. Personally he was inclined to like his new patron. He had not one word to say against him, but he instinctively felt there was some cause to distrust the man, though he could not have put his thoughts into words.

Again was he distracted with self-put questions to which he could give no answers. Why had this

post of secretary been offered to him at all? Why was Myles Rossitter seeking to compel his daughter to marry a man whom she evidently feared instead of loved? What cause had Verna to fear Christopher Moreland? What sinister part in the drama was being played by the dwarf Harris, whose influence over Rossitter must be supreme if he was in the position to act as he had done? What were the connecting links that held these three men together—Rossitter, Moreland, and Harris? Then how—and why—had Rossitter's diamonds been replaced by an imitation parcel, when the original packet had not left his possession till he handed the duplicate case to Rossitter? How did all these questions bear upon the murder of the man he had found in his London rooms—his subsequent interview with the dwarf—followed by the disappearance of Harris and the corpse?

No. Try as he would, Clayton could draw no credible or logical conclusion from this tangle of events; each one of which meant so much in itself, but—when taken together with other facts—presented such a hopeless confusion of incidents which appeared to be impossible, judged in the light of calm reason.

But there were two things for which he felt intensely grateful. In the first place he would—before many days were over—be in the same house with the girl he loved. He would be able to ask her questions, and find out the secret of what seemed to be a concerted plot against her future happiness and safety. In the second place, he would be near her in case of danger. He would protect

her, if necessary, against Moreland, even at the sacrifice of his new appointment. He could also protect her against her parent if need be, and was prepared to do so at any risk to himself. His knowledge that Verna cared for him gave new strength and courage. But for the present he decided to carefully watch the trend of events, and be prepared to act swiftly and surely against any agencies that were hostile to Verna or to himself. Clayton was so accustomed to disappointments in life that he was always ready to expect and face the worst.

During the next hour he sat at his table by the window and transcribed his shorthand notes. It was not till he came to the last letter that he rose from his seat and glanced at the shelves of books upon the walls around him. The thick, red bulk of a certain volume at last attracted his notice, and he fetched it from its place, turning over the leaves as he did so. It was a copy of Debrett's instructive work, and the name he sought was that of the Earl of Orsett. Having found the right page, he read all the information which was given concerning the families of Orsett and of Moreland. Then he returned the book to its shelf.

"So Christopher Moreland is first cousin to the present Earl of Orsett," he muttered thoughtfully, "and the Earl is unmarried. I wonder if the estates are entailed! If so, then he is probably the heir presumptive to the title and property."

The information thus obtained at any rate solved one of the questions which Clayton had been putting to himself lately. It explained why Myles Rossitter

was so anxious that his daughter should marry the owner of The Nunnery.

"All the same," Clayton exclaimed with an oath as he shut the book in front of him, "she will not marry him. She hates the man and—she loves me."

CHAPTER XIV

"I SHALL have to run up to London this afternoon."

It was Christopher Moreland who spoke. He and his secretary were slowly pacing up and down one of the garden paths in front of the house, enjoying their first after-breakfast pipes. The morning was gloriously fine, though there was a suspicion of frost in the air, and, in the sunshine, the leaves and grass were spangled with dewy beads of moisture which had melted from the wintry touch of the previous night. A fortnight had passed since Clayton first took up his residence at The Nunnery, and the days had brought a considerable alteration in his opinion of the post he held. It had soon become apparent that his presence at Moreland's country house was unnecessary, from a professional point of view, unless there was some hidden motive for it which he had not yet discovered. His secretarial work was mere child's play, and in no way justified his appointment. It could have been equally well done by Emile, or even by Emile's wife. He felt that his position was an invidious one, for he did not in any way represent the value of the salary he received. But he had decided to remain at his post till the visit of Verna and her father terminated, He had nothing to complain of in the treatment he received from his employer. His position in the

establishment was that of a guest, rather than of a paid official. But the whole situation, as it affected himself, worried him. He felt certain he was only there for some particular object—quite apart from his professional duties—and he could not guess what that object was. He was not at The Nunnery for the purpose for which he had been engaged. He was sure of that. This idea had grown and strengthened in his mind to such an extent that it unconsciously influenced his manner towards the man who had befriended him, and always exercised a constraint upon him when they were alone together.

“Will you be away for any length of time?” he asked.

“I hope to get back here to-morrow evening, in time for dinner,” Moreland replied. “It depends upon my engagements in town.”

“Will you go by train or by motor?”

“I think I will risk another run in the car. I have felt a good deal stronger during the last few days, and have almost lost the pain in my back. Have you noticed any difference in me?”

Clayton hesitated.

“I thought you walked more easily on the evening of our arrival here,” he answered. “Then, on the following morning, you did not seem so well. I have observed that, during the past week, you have only used one stick, and you hardly need that now.” He paused, for the feeling of constraint was strong upon him at the moment, and he did not wish it to be apparent to his companion. “I hope the improvement will continue, and that the cure will be a permanent one.”

"I fear there is not much chance of that," Moreland replied gravely. "I shall have to go through another operation at no distant date. That is one of the reasons why I am going up to London to-day. I want to consult my doctor, and get an opinion from him about my case. I wish to avoid the surgeon's knife till next month—till after my guests have left me."

"Is it a serious operation?"

"Not serious enough to endanger my life, I am glad to say. But it is an exceedingly painful and unpleasant one."

"What is the cause of complaint?"

"Ah! That is too difficult a question for me to answer," Moreland replied, with a side-long glance at his companion, which Clayton felt rather than saw. "My doctor might be able to diagnose it to your satisfaction, but he has never been able to do so to me. He says it is a very unusual case, and requires special treatment. As far as I can make out, it seems to have something to do with my spine, which he says is due to hereditary weakness and malformation. There I think he is wrong. Both my parents were perfectly healthy people, as far as I know, and neither of them ever suffered the tortures I often have to endure."

They walked on in silence till they reached the end of the path. They then turned, and retraced their steps.

"I hope you have made all arrangements for the people who are coming here next week?"

As Moreland put the question there was a note of anxiety in his voice.

"I have faithfully carried out all the instructions

you gave me," Clayton answered. "Is there anything more I can do?"

"The party will consist of my cousin, Lord Orsett, and his sister, Lady Anna," Moreland said, counting the names off upon his fingers. "Then there will be Myles Rossitter and his daughter. Lady Anna has, as usual, asked if she can bring a couple of friends who are now staying with her. Their name is Dixon, and they are sisters. That brings the number up to six people."

"Will they bring any servants with them?"

"Orsett will bring his valet, and Lady Anna will have her maid. I suppose the Rossitters will each bring a servant. For reasons which you know of, they will not mix with my staff in this house. You must arrange for them to have a separate room for their meals, and Emile's wife will look after them. Will you see to that for me?"

Clayton nodded, and made a note upon an envelope which he took from his pocket.

By this time they had neared the house again, and were standing in front of the modern wing which had been built on to the old building. This was almost the only portion of The Nunnery which Clayton had not visited, and for some time it had excited his curiosity and interest. The only door he could find which gave admittance to it was situated in the same passage where Moreland had his bedroom, and, though he had on several occasions tried the handle of it, he had always found it locked. He thought this was a good opportunity to try and find out some information about it from the man beside him.

"I suppose that is quite a recent addition to the house?" he said, pointing up at the red brick-work. "I have often wondered why it was put there. It is so out of keeping with the rest of the building."

Moreland looked up and gave a short laugh.

"I added those rooms myself, and have often regretted doing so," he replied. "It has rather the appearance of a Bluebeard's Chamber, but it is really the place where I store those things for which I have neither use nor space in other parts of the house. I pick up all sorts of curios when I am abroad—furniture, pictures, china, and bric-à-brac of all kinds. Some day I will take you over the rooms, and I think my collection will interest you, if you care for that sort of thing. I have the accumulation of years stored up there, and I add to it whenever my balance at the bank enables me to do so. The lower part of the building is, as you know, used as a garage." Again he glanced sideways at his companion, and once more did Clayton feel the look without seeing it. "If my cousin, Orsett, dies without issue—and at present he is unmarried—I suppose I shall inherit his estates, so my collection would then come in useful. But, as he is a younger and a far stronger man than I am, the chances are that he will outlive me. In that case, everything I possess will go to his heirs."

The voice of the speaker did not ring true, and Clayton knew that he was being deceived with a plausible story which evidently had not been concocted on the spur of the moment. However, he did not betray his suspicions. On the contrary, he showed renewed interest in the subject.

"I should very much like to see your collection," he said, "though I am no connoisseur upon artistic treasures. I have never had either the time or the money to indulge in such luxuries. But perhaps you will marry one of these days, and have an heir."

He turned and looked Moreland straight in the face for a second, but the other man did not flinch, nor show any embarrassment at the implied question. All the same, he avoided answering it, and merely shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of indifference.

"Come," he said. "It is time we went in. There are one or two letters I want you to write for me, and I have several things to attend to before I start for town."

It was during the night which followed the above conversation that Clayton experienced the first of the series of shocks which began the tragedy of the next couple of weeks. Even now, the remembrance of it brings a horror to his mind, and a shudder to his nerves, as he recalls the history of his visit to that ancient Nunnery, hidden in the silence of the forest.

The evening was a lonely, but not an idle one for him. After a solitary dinner he had gone straight to his rooms, where—free from any interruption—he started to draw up a series of notes as to the events which had occurred during the last few weeks, dating them from the day when he had received the letter from Verna Rossitter, telling him that their marriage was impossible.

He wrote slowly, giving infinite care and thought to his work, and more than once he had to pause to

refresh his memory upon some essential detail. He did not attempt to reason out any logical deductions from the succession of events and situations he was recording. He only wished to chronicle, with absolute faithfulness, a report of what has been written down in these pages. This was a diary which would be invaluable to him, and perhaps to others, for reference upon a future occasion, and he desired it to be as complete as possible in every respect. Since his stay at The Nunnery, the impression had become fixed in his mind that he had been drawn into a web of mystery and of crime, the motive and object of which he could not guess. It was only the strong suspicion that Verna Rossitter was, like himself, being forced to be an unwilling accomplice in the mystery, that decided him to remain in the employment of Christopher Moreland. As soon as the girl had left the house he was determined to resign his post, and fight the battle of life elsewhere.

Yet, if he gave up his present occupation, what was his alternative? There seemed little use returning to the profession which had so far proved so unremunerative to him, for his private resources were already practically exhausted. The thing to do would be to leave the country, and try his luck in one of the great Dominions abroad. This seemed his only chance of getting on in the world. But he must ensure the safety and well-being of Verna first.

The clock in the hall downstairs had struck the midnight hour when he at last drew his papers together and prepared to retire to bed. The door

between his bedroom and sitting-room had been left wide open, and the warmth and glow of the smouldering fire still reached him from the further apartment. With a yawn, he placed the many pages of closely written notes into his dressing case, and turned the lock. Then he took his lamp into the other room, and sleepily began to undress. There was no doubt that he was very tired. Since his arrival at The Nunnery, he had enjoyed nights of dreamless rest, which he had never experienced when living in his London chambers. It must have been due to the nourishing food and drink, and to the life-giving air of the forest which accounted for this. In the past, he had dreaded his nights, with their tormenting thoughts. Now he welcomed them, for they brought him a perfect repose and refreshment.

Having locked the outer door, he got into bed and drew the soft sheets about him. Then he blew out the candle upon the chair at his side, and let his head sink back upon the cool pillow. The great house was silent. Not a sound reached his ears, save that of a wintry wind that stirred the ivy about his windows. The dull, red glimmer of the fire cast a soothing light around him, darkening the shadows in the corners of the room, and the heavy curtains of the bed where he lay. In a few moments his eyes closed, and he fell into a deep sleep.

How long he lay there unconscious he did not know, but he suddenly started up in bed with an involuntary feeling of uneasiness. The fire had died down to the last glow of ashes, and a faint light filled the room. For no apparent reason he felt a

cold chill pass through him, and his heart beat with quick, uneven pulsation. He was conscious that there was something near him, something which he could not see, but feared, and he strained his sight into the gloom that surrounded him. He could just discern the different articles of furniture, and he drew back one of the curtains of the bed to make sure that he was alone. With a sigh of satisfaction he saw that the light was still strong enough for him to have detected the presence of any other person in the room. He was not naturally a nervous man, yet the cold shudder passed through him again as he sat up in bed and listened. He remembered that the house was chiefly inhabited by deaf mutes. Fortunately he had locked the thick oaken door, and there was no exit from the other room in which he had been writing, except that which opened into the apartment where he was. He sank back upon the bed, and drew the coverings over him. He must have been troubled by a fancy, or the wind had wakened him from sleep.

Hark ! What was that ?

He was making no mistake this time. He distinctly heard steps upon the boards of the passage outside his room. They were halting, shuffling steps, and the sound of them grew more distinct as they neared his door. A sudden horror seized him which numbed his limbs and drew forth a cold perspiration as he lay there listening and catching his breath with quick gasps. A flare shot up from the dying wooden embers, and sent a flickering light through the room. He tried to rise once more, but a sickening feeling of helplessness came over him,

and he was unable to move. He could only lie there, staring with straining eyeballs at the shadows that were moving upon the ceiling and walls.

Ah !

A hand was feeling for the knob of his door, and it was turned gently but without effect. Again he heard the soft, slithery sound of heavy movement. Then there was a pause. He opened his lips to shout for help, but remembered that no one in the great house could hear him if he did so—except perhaps Emile and his wife. With a final effort he slowly raised his head from the pillow and looked at the door. A key was being fitted into the hole, and presently it turned as though with effort in the socket. The door was opening !

If he had tried to call out at that moment he could not have done so. His throat was parched and painful, and his tongue felt limp and swollen in his mouth. His eyeballs almost fell from beneath their lids as they strained in the direction of that opening frame of darkness.

Then a figure entered the room.' Clayton at once recognized the loathsome form of the man Harris, and a dry sob of horror and disgust rose to his lips. The dwarf shambled uneasily towards the bed, and Clayton tried to recoil from his touch, but was unable to do so. The creature raised an arm and placed one hand upon the coverlet, close to Clayton's chin.

"Are you awake?"

For the life of him Clayton could not speak, but he managed to move his arm away from where it lay under the dwarf's heavy hand.

"Come, Mr Clayton. You know perfectly well who I am. This is not a ghost, but real flesh and blood. Feel me."

He placed a soft, cold hand against Clayton's cheek, and gave a low chuckle. The touch of it was like the creasy folds of withered parchment. With a gasp of loathing, Clayton at last found his voice, though his limbs still felt dead and powerless.

"You devil!" he gasped. "What are you doing here? What do you want?"

"Ah! That is better," the dwarf said in his low, musical voice. "I do not wish to disturb you more than is necessary, but I thought it time to let you know I have not forgotten you. You will remember that one of the conditions of your acceptance of this very comfortable and lucrative post was that you should carry out my instructions."

"It is a lie—a damned lie!" Clayton hissed between his dry lips. "You have taken advantage of Moreland's absence to come and play your hellish tricks on me again. I have a good mind to keep you here till I can hand you over to the police for forcible entry into another man's house."

"You certainly will not do that."

"Who will prevent me? You?"

"Yes, I. If you attempt to leave your bed till I am out of this room, I shall shoot you like a dog."

As he spoke the dwarf's hand unclosed for a moment, and showed the steely glint of a tiny revolver, which was pointed straight at Clayton's forehead.

"I have now come to remind you that I expect

you to fulfil your part of our bargain. You know what reward you will get if—if you carry out my instructions. It is a big stake and well worth playing for." He paused to give effect to his words. "That reward will be Verna Rossitter for your—wife."

"You devil!" Clayton repeated between his teeth. He knew he was at the mercy of this deformed scoundrel and dared not move, for the revolver was not a couple of inches away from his head. "If ever I get the chance of wringing the wretched life out of you I will do so—if I swing for it."

"It is foolish to talk like that," the gentle voice replied. "If I am able to show you how to save Verna Rossitter's life—and what is dearer to a woman than life itself—will it not be doing you both a good service?"

Clayton's brain was becoming clearer by this time, and he realized the desperate position he was in. With quick reasoning he determined to humour the little monstrosity who was leaning against his bed—at any rate on the present occasion.

"Go on," he gasped.

"But you do not yet know what are my instructions," said the dwarf.

"W-what—are—they?"

"You must kill Lord Orsett, Christopher Moreland's cousin."

CHAPTER XV

CLAYTON never remembered what happened after those fatal words were spoken. When he awoke from a deep sleep he saw Emile drawing up the blinds and letting a wealth of sunshine into the room. He turned heavily upon his side and watched the man as he deftly performed his duties. The servant was about to leave the room when Clayton called him back.

“Emile!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you find my door locked this morning?”

The man hesitated and looked down at the clothes upon his arm, which he was taking downstairs to brush.

“No, sir. It was not. But this is the first morning when I have not found it so. I have always used a key upon former occasions. The door was not only unlocked—but open.”

Then it had not been a dream after all! Clayton had to recognize the disquieting fact that he had actually been visited by the dwarf Harris during the night, and that the man was probably at that moment hidden in the house.

“Did you hear or see anything—or anybody during the night?”

The man looked surprised and raised his dark eyebrows.

"No, sir."

Clayton nodded wearily, and Emile left the room. As soon as he was alone he got out of bed and hurried to the dressing-case in the adjoining apartment, where he had deposited his papers on the preceding night. It was with a deep feeling of relief that he found they had not been tampered with. Perhaps after all it had only been a bad nightmare, due to the nervous tension he had experienced during the writing of his notes. But if so, then how was it that the servant had found his door open, when he distinctly remembered having shut and locked it on the previous night. Could it be that the event of the tragedy in his London rooms had so obsessed his thoughts at the time that it even continued to influence him during his sleep, producing the above-mentioned results. Yet try as he would to accept this interpretation of the dwarf's visit, he was unable to do so. The whole horrible experience had been too real to be attributed to a mere phantasy of an over-excited brain. He made up his mind to mention it to Moreland if he returned to The Nunnery that day.

It was not till the evening, after the gong had sounded for dinner, that Moreland came back. Clayton was sitting in the library when he was joined by his host, and was at once struck by the ghastly pallor of Moreland's face, and the evident exhaustion of his body. He entered the room, leaning heavily upon his two sticks, and each step seemed to give him pain. He smiled in a

dazed sort of way as he sank upon the sofa, and Emile quickly arranged the cushions behind him, and the rug over his legs.

"I fear the exertion of your visit to London has been too much for you," Clayton said. "You do not look nearly so well as when you left here yesterday. I hope you have not had bad news from your doctor?"

Moreland smiled faintly.

"Yes. The strain has been too much for me, and I got bad news—very bad news indeed. My doctor tells me it will be imperative to have another operation as soon as possible. If I delay it too long, he will not be responsible for the consequences."

"I am sorry to hear you say so," Clayton said with real sympathy. "Would it not be wiser to postpone the visits of your guests till after Christmas—or even indefinitely? The condition of your health would be a very reasonable excuse."

Moreland shook his head.

"No—no. I do not want to disappoint them now that all their arrangements are made. Besides, as I shall have the advantage of your help here, the strain of entertaining them will not be a very heavy one." He passed his hand wearily over his eyes as he spoke. "Let me see. When do they arrive?"

"To-day is Friday, and they will all travel by the same train from Victoria on Monday next. They will be here in time for dinner."

"I think we shall have to leave matters as they are," Moreland said. "I shall look to you to relieve me of as much trouble as possible. I hope it will

not involve much. My cousins are quite able to look after themselves, and Anna's lady friends will probably spend most of their time with her. There only remain Myles Rossitter and his daughter. I will ask Orsett to look after him, if you will kindly take the young lady in charge, and see that she has as good a time as is possible under the circumstances."

Clayton looked critically down at the white, drawn face upon the cushions. Was it possible that this was the man whom Verna said her father insisted upon her marrying? He was certainly not a very ardent lover.

But Moreland was too exhausted to sustain a lengthy conversation. Once again did Clayton have his dinner alone in the great, gloomy dining-room, during which meal he received a message by Emile that his host had retired to his room for the night.

It was not till the following morning that Clayton had an opportunity of speaking to Moreland about the subject which had been uppermost in his mind during the last twenty-four hours. The two men were sitting together in the library, and the secretary had just finished taking notes for the last of the letters that had to be answered. He was glancing through the sheets in his hand, when Moreland suddenly put a question to him which gave an opening to introduce the matter.

"I hope you were well looked after during my absence," he said. "Emile is a capital servant, and I left him behind me on purpose, so that he should see you wanted for nothing."

"Thank you," Clayton replied. "I could not

have been better attended to. I did not have a very busy day. As soon as I had finished the writing you left for me to do, I went for a long walk, and did not get back to The Nunnery till dinner-time."

"Ah. You must have found it lonely during the evening. What did you do with yourself?"

Clayton hesitated.

"I spent the time upstairs in my room. I had a good deal of writing to attend to, so I devoted several hours to it."

There was a silence, during which Clayton glanced once more through the papers in his hand. Then he looked at the man upon the sofa, and decided to relate his weird experience with the dwarf.

"There is one matter I should like to mention to you," he said, "for I think you ought to know about it. I should have spoken last night, but I had not an opportunity of seeing you after dinner, and, in any case, you were too tired after your journey to be troubled with such a thing."

"What is it? Nothing unpleasant, I hope."

"It was decidedly unpleasant at the time," Clayton said gravely. "And you ought to be upon your guard."

"Upon my guard! With regard to what—to whom?"

"With regard to that dwarf."

"Dwarf! What dwarf?"

"I refer to the man Harris, who occupies the rooms opposite to your flat in London."

"Oh! That poor little fellow! I do not think I need much guard against him. What has he been doing now? Writing offensive letters to you—or to

me? I daresay he has got a nasty side to his character—like most of us."

"It is a much more serious matter than writing letters."

"In what way?"

"He has been down here—here in your house."

"The devil he has! How do you know?"

"Because I have seen him—and spoken to him."

"When? Where?"

"He came into my bedroom on the night you were in town. Although the door was locked, he had a key. Bah! It was a loathsome sight."

Moreland shifted his position painfully upon the sofa where he lay.

"But, my dear Clayton, why on earth should he take the trouble to come all this way from London, and for what purpose? I doubt if he knows of the existence of this house. Surely you were dreaming. I cannot believe such a thing possible, and it is most improbable."

"I assure you I was not dreaming," Clayton said sternly. "His visit was evidently timed so as to take place during your absence."

"But what could have been the object of it?"

"To make a most diabolical proposal to me."

"May I ask what his proposal was?"

"I can only tell you on condition that it does not go beyond yourself."

"Of course, I promise you it will not go beyond myself."

"It sounds incredible, but his proposal was that I should murder your cousin, Lord Orsett, during his visit here."

"Good God! But what in the name of reason has Harris got to do with my cousin, Orsett? I do not understand you."

"That was his suggestion," Clayton said dryly. "You can believe it or not as you please. But I swear it was what the little fiend proposed."

"Do you know anything about the man?"

"No. And I do not want to."

"But you were on your way to call upon him when you came to my rooms by mistake," Moreland said, with a slight lifting of his eyebrows.

"I had only seen him twice before then," Clayton said uncomfortably, "and on each occasion his company was neither sought nor desired. As a matter of fact, when I last saw him in London, I told him plainly that I never wanted to see his face again."

"But why on earth should he ask you to do such a thing?"

"I have no idea. The whole affair is a mystery to me."

"Have you any suspicion of his motives in desiring the death of my cousin?"

"My dear sir, I know absolutely nothing about the little man," Clayton said with a shade of impatience in his voice. "He is practically a stranger to me, and I hope he will remain so."

"Will you please describe exactly what took place in your room the other night? I should like to hear every detail."

"There is not much to describe," Clayton said, "but I will certainly tell you all that happened. What seems to me of far more importance, is to find out

how he obtained entrance to this house, and whether he is still lurking about the premises. A creature of his size and cunning might hide himself anywhere—especially at this time of year, when the days are so short."

So Clayton described minutely everything that had happened in his room during that strange nocturnal visit. The only detail he omitted to mention was any reference to the bribe which the dwarf had offered him. He was determined to keep Verna's name out of the affair as long as possible. Moreland lay back upon his cushions and listened attentively, till Clayton had finished his narrative. After it was ended, some minutes passed before either of the two men spoke.

"Is that all?" Moreland asked presently.

"All! Good God—is it not enough?"

"But your story ends just where the most important part should begin. What answer did you give him, when he suggested you should do this thing?"

"I remember nothing more after those last words of his."

"In fact, you went to sleep again?"

"I was in a very nervous and highly-strung condition," Clayton said irritably, "and I have told you all I can recollect of what occurred. It is possible I may have fainted. The little man may have drugged me. His hand was not a couple of feet from my nose and mouth."

"But, presuming that what you have told me really took place, do you seriously think that the man would have run all that risk without obtaining some definite answer from you? Supposing, for the sake

of argument, that he thought you would obey his instructions, I can hardly believe he would have made such a proposal without offering a very substantial *quid pro quo*. Had you been willing to negotiate with him in this matter, is it likely you would have done such a thing for—nothing?"

Clayton ignored the last question.

"I can only repeat what I have already told you," he said. "By some means the man obtained an entrance to your house, and a key that fitted my door. I have informed you of the object of his visit, as it is clearly my duty to warn you about what is going on. I am as ignorant of his motives as you are, but the fact remains that he did come to my room the other night, and he made the proposal which I have just referred to."

Moreland turned slowly upon his side, and faced the man who stood looking down upon him.

"My dear Clayton," he said, and his thin lips parted in a smile. "I hope you will not think me either foolish or rude, but the whole story is so fantastic and improbable that I am inclined to put it down to a very unpleasant, but realistic sort of nightmare. You had probably been over-working your brain before going to bed. It is possible that the personality of little Harris had so occupied your thoughts, that it left a lingering impression upon your mind before you went to sleep. Pardon me saying so, but there is not a single part of your statement—interesting though it sounds—that carries the slightest suggestion of probability. I wish, for your sake, that you had been visited by the ghost of the Lady Abbess. She would have been far less

troublesome—and infinitely more picturesque.” He stretched out a hand, and laid it lightly upon Clayton’s knee. “All the same it is a proof of your loyalty to me that you should have mentioned it, and I thank you. The impression must have been a very vivid one indeed.”

“Then you do not believe what I have told you?”

“That is rather a strong way of putting it. I think you have suffered from a delusion. That is all. I have often suffered from them myself.”

Clayton bit his lip with suppressed vexation. It was a curious fact that upon each occasion when he had met the man Harris, it had been said that he suffered from a delusion. M’Lean had suggested the same thing when he had described to him the visit of the dwarf to his chambers in London on the night of the murder. The police, and Doctor Bransby, had been equally sceptical when he gave his evidence at the inquest. Now, here was Christopher Moreland adopting the same attitude towards him. And the unfortunate part of the matter was that, as usual, he had not a scrap of evidence to prove that his statements were correct, while everything pointed to the contrary.

“Of course, if you take that view, there is nothing more to be said. But, if I come across that little man again, I shall not let him escape without obtaining some definite proof that what I have told you is true. Will that satisfy you?”

“Perfectly,” Moreland replied, and his head sank back upon the pillow. “Will you kindly ring the bell for Emile before you go? The pain in my back is giving me torment.”

CHAPTER XVI

AT last the day arrived when the house party was due to arrive at The Nunnery. Clayton had seen that all the arrangements were complete, and nothing had surprised him more than the methodical and satisfactory way in which his orders had been carried out—under the guidance of Emile—by the strange and afflicted servants in the house. As he passed through the rooms to take a last look round them, he noticed that not only had his instructions been obeyed in every detail, but that other—and often desirable—additions had been made, which were conducive to the pleasure and comfort of the coming guests. In Lord Orsett's apartment, the furniture had been rearranged to considerable advantage. In Lady Anna's boudoir, the vases had been filled with choice flowers from the conservatories. In Verna's room, not only flowers, but books and magazines had been added to the tables and shelves. As his host had told him, the domestic arrangements worked with automatic precision, and the result was eminently satisfactory.

During all this time Christopher Moreland had been far from well. The complaint which troubled him seemed to have acquired a renewed activity, and most of his days were spent in his bedroom or lying upon the sofa in the library. But, whenever

necessary, he had nerved himself to do his best in attending to the arrangements made for the comfort of his visitors. Both he and Clayton were awaiting their arrival in the hall with varied emotions. It was a cold, wintry evening, and a fall of snow was being tossed across the countryside before a driving wind.

A huge fire was piled high upon the hearth, and sent a warm glow on every side of them, lighting up the old tapestries upon the walls, and the draperies of the banners that hung above them. The wind whistled shrilly outside, and sent strange, whispering sounds through the distant galleries and passages.

"I shall look to you to see me through this job," Moreland said with a faint smile, as he moved his chair a few inches nearer to the fire. "I am feeling very far from well, and I shall not be sorry when we are left alone again. This sort of thing takes a lot out of a man in my condition."

"I will do all I possibly can to make things go easily for you," Clayton replied. "You have only to tell me what you want, and it shall be done. For your sake, I wish the visits could have been postponed."

For one moment he felt sorry for the man in the chair beside him. Then his thoughts at once reverted to the delicious anticipation which had been filling his thoughts during the last few days. Verna Rossitter and he were to meet again, and under the same roof.

Suddenly they heard the sound of the motors wheeling through the snow, scrunching the gravel and the thin ice that had formed upon it. Emile

hurried across the hall, and Moreland rose painfully from his seat.

The next few moments were full of bustle and confusion. Introductions were quickly made by the host—the ladies' wraps had to be taken off, and his lordship's fur coat hung upon a peg of safety. Liveried footmen appeared, silent and watchful, to help in the general arrangement of things, and the hall was full of voices—glad, merry voices, which woke the echoes high up among the dark rafters of The Nunnery.

But Clayton was only conscious of one thing. Verna was before him, with her sweet face half hidden under her furs, and a startled look of glad surprise—which no lover could have mistaken—shining from the depths of her eyes.

The separation of the party was as sudden as its arrival. From the distance came the sounds of hurrying feet, and the movement of heavy luggage. The grim silence of The Nunnery had quickly changed into a rush of noise and activity. Clayton hurried up to his room to get ready for dinner.

While he was dressing, he revelled in the thought that etiquette would oblige him to take Verna in to dinner. Moreland, of course, would attend to Lady Anna, while his lordship would escort the elder Miss Dixon—who was the daughter of an impoverished Irish peer. It was impossible for Myles Rossitter to take in his own daughter, so he would have to pair off with the younger Miss Dixon. This left only one couple—Verna and himself.

As they took their seats at the table, which was richly covered with silver and flowers and shrim-

mering glass, Clayton turned to the girl beside him, and spoke in a low voice.

"This is better luck than I either expected or deserve. Did you know I was here when you accepted our host's invitation?"

"I had no idea we should meet," she replied, with a happy laugh. "I cannot answer for my father." She began to crumble the roll of bread beside her with nervous fingers, and Clayton noticed with a thrill of pride how small and delicate they were. "But why are *you* here?" she asked, looking slowly up at him. "I had no idea you were a friend of—of Mr Moreland's. I thought you were in London."

"I am only one of the paid servants of the house," Clayton answered grimly. Then he added hastily "but I have no cause to complain of that. I am Christopher Moreland's secretary."

The buzz of conversation had now become general, and it was easy enough to talk without being overheard by the other people at the table.

"I should not have thought such a post would have suited you a bit," she said, as she raised her eyes gravely to his face. "How do you get on together?"

"I could not wish for a kinder or more considerate master to work for. He treats me more like a friend than—a paid official."

The girl remained silent, but the fingers upon the table moved more nervously than ever beside her plate.

"As for the post," Clayton continued, "I fear it is a case of beggars not being choosers. I had no alternative—and the salary is a very generous one."

"Do you like living here?" she asked, without looking up. "It must be so different to your former life in London."

"I do not ask myself whether I like it or not," he answered guardedly. "I have at any rate had one reward for my work—that of meeting you here."

A faint flush came to the girl's cheek, and she turned to answer a question which had been addressed to her by Lord Orsett, who was her other neighbour.

Clayton for the first time let his gaze wander round the table, as he mentally criticised the people who sat at it. He avoided looking at Myles Rossitter. He had not met the millionaire since the night when he had taken him the parcel of imitation diamonds which had in so inexplicable a manner been substituted for the original one. The last time he had seen the great financier was when he had left him unconscious upon the sofa at his house in Berkeley Square. They had not yet exchanged any words together, and he wondered upon what terms they would meet. Were they to be friends or enemies? Clayton felt indifferent as to which line of action Rossitter adopted towards himself. His only thought was to save Verna from a marriage which was distasteful to her, and he determined to devote all his energies to that purpose. He did not care what the consequences might be.

The other guests at the table did not interest him much. Lady Anna was an elderly lady, good-looking but badly dressed. Conversation seemed an effort to her, and neither she nor Moreland

appeared to have much in common. The two Miss Dixons looked very dull. They were thin and middle-aged and exceedingly shy. It was rather pathetic to see the eagerness with which they tried to make conversation, and the obvious boredom of the men who sat next to them. The last person in the party upon whom Clayton's eyes rested was Lord Orsett. He watched him with peculiar interest, and, as he did so, his heart warmed to him at once. His lordship was still a comparatively young man, on the sunny side of fifty, and he had a pleasant, good-natured face. He was not as good-looking as his sister, but the expression upon his rather rubicund countenance was a very cheery one, and the twinkle in his eyes showed that he had a strong sense of humour. As Clayton looked at him their eyes met, and each one felt he had found a friend in trouble. Lord Orsett did not take any pains to conceal the fact that he was inexpressibly bored.

"This seems to be an interesting house. Is it very old?"

Clayton turned towards the girl as she put the question, and was surprised at the expression upon her face. It was one of anxiety mingled with fear.

"Yes. It dates back a good many centuries," he replied. "It used to be a convent in the old days, and all sorts of strange things are said to have happened here."

Her next words came as an unpleasant shock to Clayton, for she leaned sideways and whispered into his ear.

"Do any strange things happen here now?"

He laughed uneasily, for her enquiry suddenly reminded him of the visit of the dwarf.

"I suppose one always expects something unusual to happen in an old place like this, where there are so many historic associations," he replied. "It adds an interest to life, and provides a new sensation."

"Have *you* seen anything unusual here?" she asked in a low voice.

He looked up and was about to answer, when he met the eyes of Christopher Moreland fixed full upon his face. His host's gaze was immediately averted, but the idea that the subject of their conversation had been guessed by him gave Clayton a feeling of disquietude which was distinctly disconcerting.

"I have seen so many strange things happen in my life that I am always prepared for the worst," he answered. "It is a very great mistake to think that life is a sort of mathematical problem which can be accurately worked out from a given premise to a logical conclusion. It is nothing of the sort. It is full of surprises—even for those who study it most."

"But you have not answered my question," the girl said. She did not look at him as she spoke, and her voice was barely above a whisper. "Have *you* seen any strange things happen here?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I am terrified at being in this house—with that man."

One little jewelled finger was raised for a moment

from the table-cloth in the direction where Christopher Moreland sat.

Then Clayton lied bravely, and the tone of his voice gave no reason for doubt.

"No. I have seen nothing unusual in the house. Of course, there are the usual silly rumours that the house is haunted and——"

"Haunted by what—by whom ?"

She was so serious in her manner that Clayton turned and glanced at her face. It was deathly pale.

"Well, they say that The Nunnery is haunted by the spirit of a former Abbess, but the whole thing is absurd. It has always been popular to give undue prominence to legends of that sort. It provides a picturesque atmosphere which is always acceptable in a sensation-loving age like this. Perhaps I ought not to have mentioned it to you."

She shuddered.

"You are sure the ghost is that of an—Abbess ?"

"I am not sure of anything of the kind," Clayton said. He regretted the turn which their conversation had taken, for the girl was affected by it in a manner quite out of proportion to its merit. "I have not seen her ladyship," he answered carelessly, "and I do not think she will trouble either you or me."

"The ghost is not that of—of—a—*dwarf* ?"

For a moment the bright scene in front of him swam before Clayton's eyes. He heard the indistinct hum of conversation around him, and a sudden, unreasoning sensation of fear came over him as he heard the words which Verna Rossitter

had whispered. What did she know about the dwarf? How was she mixed up in the vile machinations of the man Harris?

Then Lady Anna made a movement to rise, and Moreland hastened to the door and opened it. As the ladies left the room Verna looked up at Clayton, and the expression upon her face haunted him all through the night.

CHAPTER XVII

IT was Christmas Eve.

The members of the house party at The Nunnery had settled themselves down to the routine of their visit to Christopher Moreland with a laudable adaptation which might hardly have been expected under the circumstances. The weather had been bad and the opportunities for pleasurable occupations had been few. With the exception of rare walks or drives during the day, and bridge or billiards during the evening, they had endured a monotony which was certainly not in keeping with the associations of the festive season. Probably the only two people who had really enjoyed themselves were the two Miss Dixons, but they would have done so anywhere and under almost any conditions outside the environment of their home in a remote part of Donegal, and away from the society of their august father, whose chief topic of conversation was that of the iniquities of a Radical Government.

The lights were lit in the drawing-room, and three people were engaged in conversation. They were Moreland, Clayton, and Verna Rossitter. At a writing-table in the distance sat Lady Anna, busy sending off the last of her Christmas cards to the girls of her G.F.S. club at home. The two Miss Dixons had retired to their rooms. Lord Orsett,

who, soon after his arrival had declared his intention not to live the life of a fungus or die of mental and physical atrophy, had motored into Tunbridge Wells with Myles Rossitter.

Verna was sitting upon a low chair beside the fire, shading her face from the heat with a fan of peacock's feathers, and listening to the conversation which was being carried on between the two men, but with little show of interest. Occasionally she stole an upward glance at Clayton, who stood upon the hearth-rug, but she steadily avoided looking towards the sofa where her host sat, leaning back against the cushions, with a rug drawn over his knees. They had been talking, in a desultory way, about the old-fashioned customs of the season, and Moreland had just expressed his regrets that he had not arranged for some carol singers to come out from the neighbouring village of Ardley, and serenade them.

"In these days it is impossible to get the people to take any interest in that sort of thing," he said. "They will only do so if they are paid for their time and trouble. That is all they care for. It is a pity to see how many of these old fashions are dying out because nobody is sufficiently disinterested to carry them on, unless it is made worth his while. Do you care for carols, Miss Rossitter?"

"Yes," the girl replied, "if they are sung for the love of the thing, and for the memories they are associated with. I should hate them if they are only given for the money that can be made out of them. It would seem a sort of blasphemy. Don't you think so?"

"I entirely agree with you," Clayton replied. (He always did agree with what Verna Rossitter said) "But I fear I must include myself among the modern Goths. I have not sent one single Christmas card this year, and I feel terribly ashamed of myself when I see the diligence of Lady Anna at the table over there." He shifted his position upon the rug as he spoke. "But I have so few friends, that my negligence will not seriously affect the trade." He laughed rather bitterly. "I have not even got any Christmas presents."

"Ah! That reminds me," Moreland said, as he looked at the figure of the girl beside the fire. "I have a favour to ask of you, Miss Rossitter."

She glanced up, but without interest.

"Of me?"

"Yes. As I am sure you have not yet chosen a Christmas present for myself, I am going to ask you if you will allow me to choose it for you?"

She laughed, but there was not much merriment in her voice.

"That is a quaint way of putting it," she said. "I always leave these matters to my father to arrange, except as regards my most intimate friends. Perhaps your choice is an impossible one."

"No. It is not impossible. It also has the great merit of not costing you anything."

"That is certainly a consideration in these days," Verna said. She did not realize the absurdity of such a remark falling from the lips of a girl who was the only child of a man whose yearly income was represented by six figures. "What is it you want?"

Clayton moved restlessly where he stood. He did

not like the turn which the conversation had taken, and resented the implied familiarity between his host and the woman beside him.

"I want you to sit for your portrait," Moreland answered, "and I also want you to allow me to keep the picture when it is finished."

"That is a poor sort of Christmas present," Verna said, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I do not mind sitting for my portrait, if you can find somebody to paint it. It will be something to do."

Her words were unintentionally rude, seeing that she was speaking to her host, who had done his best to make her visit as pleasant a one as possible. Clayton winced visibly, but Moreland took no notice of the implied rebuke. He leaned forward upon the sofa with sudden eagerness.

"That is good of you," he said, "and you will let me keep the portrait afterwards?"

Again were the delicate shoulders lifted with a gesture of indifference.

"You can do what you like with it," she said, rising from her seat, and she glanced at Clayton as she did so. "But I should think the best thing to do would be to burn it. It would certainly not be worth including among all the lovely things you have got here."

"Good. Then that is settled." Moreland turned to Clayton as he spoke. "Do you know of any worthy and struggling artist who would accept such a commission, if he were asked to name his own price?"

Clayton did not answer at once. When he did so, his voice was full of a sudden enthusiasm.

"I know nothing about struggling artists," he replied, "though I daresay there are plenty of them like struggling barristers. But I know a man who would give you every satisfaction, if you could get him to take on the job. He is thought a good deal of in London, and he has exhibited regularly in the Academy for several years."

"What is his name?"

"Athol M'Lean."

"Yes, I have heard of him. He is considered to be one of our coming men. So he is a friend of yours. Do you think he would come down here and paint Miss Rossitter's portrait? Perhaps if you wrote to him he would be more likely to do so than if he got a letter from a stranger like myself."

"I will write to him if you wish me to do so," Clayton replied. "He is a very busy man, and I do not know what his engagements are, but—if you want the portrait painted—I cannot think of a better artist to do it."

"May I invite Mr M'Lean for that purpose?" Moreland asked the girl, who was standing beside the mantelpiece. "You will confer a great favour upon me if I may do so."

She inclined her head in token of assent, and then turned and left the room.

"How she detests this man," was the thought which instantly passed through Clayton's mind, as he closed the door behind her. "I should like to know the reason, but I cannot mention the subject to her, unless she gives me a lead."

"Then you will write to Mr M'Lean this evening,

and ask him if he will accept the commission from me?" Moreland said, as he drew the rug higher over his legs. "I remember now that his name was one of those which you gave me before I had the privilege of making use of your services here. If he is able, and willing, to come, I should like to see him here as soon as possible after Christmas."

"I will write to him to-night, but I do not know if he is in town. He may have gone abroad for a holiday, for he is a very erratic sort of man. Anyhow, I will send my letter to his London address, and ask his servant to forward it."

At that moment the stately figure of Lady Anna came majestically across the room from the distant table where she had been writing. She had a large number of bulky envelopes in her hand, and there was a worried expression upon her face.

"Thank goodness they are finished," she said, as she paused beside the sofa where Moreland lay. "My dear Christopher, is it possible to get these posted here to-night. I should be so sorry if they reached their destinations too late. When is the last post out?"

"I fear the last post from The Nunnery has already gone," Moreland replied, "but I daresay I can get them taken into Ardley. That is our nearest town—if you can call it a town."

Clayton stepped forward.

"I shall have a letter which must be sent off to-night," he said, "and will be delighted to take yours with mine, Lady Anna."

Ever since he had been at The Nunnery, Clayton had made a point of always posting his own letters.

Fortunately, there were not many of them, but he had an indefinable feeling that it was best for him to do so. He was full of suspicions with regard to the house where he was making his home, and he did not like the idea of his envelopes being possibly opened before they started on their journey. He felt it was necessary to be constantly on guard, lest such things should happen.

"That is very kind of you," Lady Anna said. "But it is a long way, is it not?"

"Only about three miles," Clayton replied. "That is nothing for me, and I should enjoy the walk after dinner. It is a lovely night."

An hour later, when the party were assembled in the drawing-room before dinner, a note was brought to Lady Anna from her host, asking her to make his excuses for not joining them. He had been in great pain all day, and would take his meal upstairs.

"Poor fellow," her ladyship said, as she read the note out loud for the benefit of the others. "He looks shockingly ill, and I am sure his doctor does not understand him a bit. I wish we could persuade him to join us in the south of Europe for a few weeks."

Lord Orsett tried hard to look sympathetic, but he was very hungry after his drive, and wanted his dinner. The suggestion did not seem to commend itself to him at all.

"Much better leave him with the people who understand him and his complaint—whatever it is," he said. "It would be a great inconvenience if he were suddenly taken worse upon the yacht."

"But these people do *not* understand him," Lady Anna said plaintively. "That is just what I complain of," and she followed the other guests into the dining-room upon the arm of Myles Rossitter, who had been a silent spectator of the scene.

The night was fine, though dark, when Clayton started on his walk to the neighbouring small town of Ardley. He knew his way well, for this was the direction he generally took when he left the grounds of The Nunnery. There was no moon, but the ground was covered with a thin coating of crisp snow, which clearly defined the line of the path through the forest and over the moor. He was glad of the excuse to get away from the stuffy rooms and heat of the great fires. Lord Orsett and Rossitter had started a game of billiards, and there was no inducement to stay indoors—unless it was for the chance of having a few words with Verna before she retired to her room. He also wanted space and freedom for thought, as there were many matters which he wished to discuss with himself without fear of interruption. His pockets were full of Lady Anna's letters, and among them was the one he had written that evening to Athol M'Lean, asking him to come down as soon as possible to The Nunnery, to undertake the work of painting Miss Rossitter's portrait. His letter contained a good deal more than that request. He had urged strongly that M'Lean should accept the offer, not so much on account of its financial benefits, but because he most earnestly desired the presence of his friend in that house of mystery. He felt he was upon the eve of some great crisis in his life—a crisis which might

affect the future happiness of others besides himself, and he needed the help and guidance of another man. For obvious reasons, he could not confide in Myles Rossitter, while Lord Orsett was too much of a stranger for him to trouble him with private and personal matters. In fact, it was the safety of his lordship which was one of the chief considerations in Clayton's mind at the time. Since that last nocturnal visit from the dwarf, he had neither seen nor heard of him. Yet he felt very sure that the man, Harris, had some diabolical plan in view, and that the greatest care and precaution would have to be exercised to prevent a possible tragedy taking place. Moreland was useless for all practical purposes of help. Apart from his growing infirmity, he did not pretend to believe one word of Clayton's story of the appearance of the dwarf in his room. M'Lean might be more open to reason and to argument, though even he had proved sceptical when the matter had been mentioned to him in his Chelsea studio. At any rate, he was dependable, and could be relied upon where action was required. Emile was his master's servant, and therefore not to be approached upon a matter of this kind.

Having disposed of the contents of his pockets, Clayton started upon his return journey. By this time, the sky was not so overcast, and a faint light glimmered from the star-haze above him. In spite of his anxiety and troubled thoughts, he enjoyed his walk. Certainly the air of the forest agreed with him, for he felt a stronger and healthier man since he had left the seclusion of his London rooms. He walked along at a swinging pace, and had just turned

into the drive which led up to The Nunnery, when a shadow suddenly fell across his path.

"I should like a few words with you, Mr Clayton."

The voice was soft and musical, and Clayton paused with a start. Although he could not see the figure, he knew that the dwarf was standing not a couple of yards away from him, in the deep gloom of the trees.

But, upon this occasion, he felt he was his own master. He was in a very different mental condition to that in which he had been when he had previously met this man. His brain was clear and active. There could be no question about this meeting being the result of an over-strained mind, or the after-impression of a dream. He was in robust health, and the night's walk had added a new vigour to his muscles. He was determined to obtain some definite explanation from his tormentor, or choke the truth from his miserable, distorted body.

He felt no pity for the man, and decided at once that this should be their last interview.

"What do you want?" he asked in a hard voice. "Come out where I can see you, and don't sneak away under that tree."

The little figure shuffled slowly forward. It was covered with a long, dark cloak which trailed upon the ground.

"I want to know if you are prepared to carry out your part of our contract," the dwarf said meaningly. "If you are, then I am prepared to do the same. If not——"

He paused, and drew the folds of the garment more closely round his diminutive figure.

"And—if—not?"

Clayton did not attempt to disguise the sneer in his voice as he repeated the words.

"Then you will hang for the murder of the man I saw you kill in your rooms in London."

Clayton gave a loud laugh, which sounded unpleasantly in the silence of the night.

"You know that is a lie," he said. "A damned lie."

"Can you prove it to be a lie?" the soft voice asked. "I can even show how you committed the murder. That is a fact which not even the expert medical evidence at the inquest was able to do."

"Then do it."

"No. I still hope it will not be necessary. You have so much to gain by carrying out my instructions, and so much to lose by not doing so, that I trust it will not be necessary for me to adopt extreme measures."

Clayton ground his teeth with ill-suppressed fury. He required all his self-control not to seize the little man and throttle him where he stood. For the present, however, he determined to humour him, and find out as much as possible before he resorted to physical force.

"May I ask to what you refer, when you speak about extreme measures?" he asked in a voice which sounded less hostile than formerly.

"I will go straight to the police—to Scotland Yard in London, and give them such proof that you murdered that man, that no jury would hesitate to return a verdict of 'Guilty' against you." He paused, and moved a step nearer to Clayton. "You

remember the inquest? You also remember that there were certain curious symptoms about the corpse which the doctors were unable to account for. I know how those symptoms were brought about, and I could prove that you were the actual cause of them."

"If you know so much about the nature of that man's death, it strikes me very forcibly that you committed the murder yourself."

The dwarf shook his head with a gesture of annoyance.

"It is foolish to say that. How could I commit the murder, when I was with you in Berkeley Square only a short time before I found you and the body in your chambers?"

"The same argument applies with even more force to myself," Clayton replied coldly. "Have you anything further to say upon this matter, before I take you into the house yonder, and hand you over to my host—Christopher Moreland—or his servants till the police are fetched?"

"That would be a most unwise thing to do," Harris said suavely. "It would not only at once secure the noose round your own neck, but it would bring unspeakable misfortune to——"

"To—whom?"

"To Verna Rossitter—the woman you love."

Clayton raised his hand to strike the little figure to the ground, but as suddenly let it drop to his side again.

"How dare you say such a thing?" he hissed. "We will leave Miss Rossitter out of our conversation. Now, tell me exactly what your so-called

instructions are, and what I shall gain or lose if I carry them out."

"My instructions are simple enough," Harris said evenly. "You must contrive, by some means or other, to bring about the death of Lord Orsett during his visit to The Nunnery. As he will be leaving here upon the 2nd of next month, it will be necessary for you to carry out your arrangements before that date. I suggest that you should do the thing on—on New Year's Eve."

"In fact, your instructions are that I shall murder Lord Orsett before he leaves Christopher Moreland's house?"

"You can word it in that way if you like," the dwarf replied.

"And what do I get for my reward, if I am successful in carrying out your suggestion?" Clayton asked. He was amazed at the devilish daring of this man. Had the situation not been so serious, so uncanny, he would have laughed aloud, and then thrashed the dwarf within an inch of his miserable life. But he wished to find out as much as possible, so that he might take the necessary precautions. "I am not going to do this thing for—nothing."

"I have already told you, more than once, what your reward will be. Verna Rossitter will become your wife, and, incidentally, you will some day share her fortune, which will be a very considerable one."

Clayton quickly reviewed the situation. It was difficult to decide upon the spur of the moment what was the best thing to be done. On the one hand he was determined not to let the dwarf escape him this time, though what he should do with him he did not know. On the other hand he had to consider

the happiness—and possibly the safety—of Verna. The ridiculous suggestion that he should murder Lord Orsett was the matter which troubled him least. It was too absurd for serious consideration.

“I am waiting for your answer,” the dwarf said, edging nearer to Clayton’s side. “The reward will be yours if you carry out your part of our agreement.”

“I should like a clearer definition as to what our ‘agreement’ is,” Clayton asked laconically.

“To obey my instructions in everything connected with your appointment as Christopher Moreland’s secretary.”

“Then my answer is this,” Clayton replied in a voice vibrating with passion, “I absolutely refuse to have anything to do with you or with any of your damnable schemes.”

“Is that your final answer?” Harris asked coolly. “Remember, your decision now has a good deal to do with your future life—or death.”

“It is my final answer.”

“Your decision is irrevocable? Take care, Mr Clayton, and weigh your words well.”

“Yes, you little devil. It is irrevocable, and now you will come with me into Ardley, and I will hand you over to the police. You talk about me hanging for a murder I never committed, but reptiles like you are not fit to live. There is no good resisting, for——”

But Clayton did not finish his sentence. With a cat-like spring the dwarf was upon him, and his horrid fat hands were clutching his throat. He struggled furiously, but the weight of his assailant

was as surprising as was his strength. They fell to the ground together, with limbs entwined. Clayton tried to shout for help, but his mouth was pressed back by the soft, loose creases of flesh. There was a humming in his ears and a feeling of acute sickness in his throat. Then with a sense of overwhelming weakness and horror, he sank back unconscious.

When at length Clayton opened his eyes, he found himself stretched upon his bed and the sunshine of a bright Christmas morning was flooding the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

AFTER the amazing experience of the previous night Clayton felt far too much unstrung to put in an appearance at the breakfast table. He rang for Emile, and sent a message to Moreland asking to be excused from the morning meal as he was suffering from a bad headache. The answer which was brought back was a kind and considerate one, begging him on no account to leave his room till he felt well enough to do so, and expressing a hope that he would soon be all right again.

But after his cold bath Clayton began to feel much better both in mind and body. Emile served a dainty breakfast to him in his sitting-room, and, while he was enjoying it beside the window, he saw a motor car move quickly down the drive, bearing Lord Orsett, Lady Anna, and the two Miss Dixons —presumably to church in Ardley.

There were few letters of Christmas greeting for him upon his plate, but he was relieved to see that one of them bore the handwriting of Athol M'Lean and a London postmark. Having read the contents of the envelopes, he tossed them upon one side and tried to concentrate his thoughts upon what had happened during the previous night in the drive of The Nunnery, when he was face to face with the dwarf —Harris. Every detail of that interview was clear in

his mind. He could recall each word that had passed between them. He remembered the last struggle upon the ground, but after that his memory was a blank. Had he fainted in his attempts to free himself from the weight and strength of his horrible assailant? Had he been drugged? Had he been stunned with a blow from those loose-fleshed hands? He was certain that the last theory was impossible, for there was not a single mark of violence upon his face or body. He recalled the ghastly sensation of sickness that had come to him as he lost consciousness, and was inclined to believe he had fainted. Yet, if that was the case, how was it that he had found himself in his bedroom when he awoke? How had he been smuggled into the house, and by whom? In spite of the surprising muscular strength of the dwarf, Clayton knew that he could not have performed such a feat alone and unassisted. Then there was the inevitable risk of discovery by the guests or the servants staying at The Nunnery. Both Lord Orsett and Myles Rossitter were men who did not retire to their rooms till late, and there was also Emile and the other two valets to take into account. The more Clayton puzzled over the affair the more hopelessly confused did he become. These facts had actually happened—he would swear to them upon oath in any Court of Law—but he could offer no reasonable explanation of them. He could suggest no possible solution to the mystery, and once more he possessed no proof.

The only thought which consoled him was that in a couple of days time at most he would no longer be alone to solve the hateful problem which con-

fronted him. He would have his old friend Athol M'Lean with him, and take the earliest opportunity of placing all the facts of the case before him. Perhaps the shrewd, calculating Scottish mind would be able to supply some answers to the involved questions which were tormenting him. He decided not to mention the affair to either Moreland or Lord Orsett. He felt sure they would not believe a word of his story, for it sounded far too improbable for credence. Myles Rossitter was equally impossible as a confidant. Beyond the merest courtesy of recognizing his presence, the millionaire had ignored him ever since they had met at The Nunnery. This avoidance of his host's secretary would have been noticed by all the other guests had they any reason to suspect there was any coolness between the two men. Clayton was quite indifferent to such behaviour. Although it placed him in an awkward relationship towards the father of the girl he loved, it relieved him of what would otherwise have been an infinitely more embarrassing situation. His original friendly feeling towards the man had altered to a deep misgiving and distrust, ever since the interview which had taken place between them on the occasion when he had returned the parcel of diamonds to its owner and been charged with theft and blackmail. That had been an insult he could never forget nor forgive, and it was only the fact that Rossitter was Verna's father which prompted Clayton to observe an outward show of respect towards him. Besides, the position he held in the house would have made any other attitude impossible.

The windows of Clayton's rooms looked out upon the drive and commanded a view of the old-world gardens that stretched upon each side of it. As he paused to admire them he saw the figure of Verna Rossitter walk slowly towards the gates that opened on to the forest and the common beyond the lodges. Without a moment's hesitation he hurried downstairs, and left the house just as she turned the corner. She was almost upon the very spot where he and the dwarf had struggled together in the darkness but a few hours ago. She looked round with a slight start as she heard the sound of his steps approaching her upon the frozen ground, and a flush of pleasure came to her face as she recognized whom he was.

"A merry Christmas to you, Mr Clayton," she said, "and a happy and prosperous New Year. We were sorry to hear at breakfast that you were not well enough to join us. Lady Anna says it is all her fault, and she ought not to have let you take that long, cold walk last night."

"I do not think the walk had anything to do with it," Clayton replied, after reciprocating her good wishes. "I enjoyed it immensely, and it did me a lot of good. I cannot stand those over-heated rooms, and the want of ventilation at night. It was really very kind of Lady Anna to give me such a good excuse for going out, though I also had an important letter of my own to post, so I should have taken the walk in any case. It was a letter which chiefly concerned yourself."

"Concerned—*me!*"

"Yes. It was to my friend, Athol M'Lean, asking

him to come to The Nunnery and paint your portrait, as a commission from Mr Moreland."

As the girl looked round at the man beside her, a frown came to her pretty face, and she tapped her stick impatiently upon the ground.

"But I do not want my portrait painted for Mr Moreland," she said.

"You gave him your permission last night," Clayton said gravely. "Why did you not refuse then?"

"Because it would have been useless for me to do so," she answered. "Had I refused, Mr Moreland would have asked my father, and he would have given his consent at once."

"But surely not if you told him it was against your wishes?"

"My father has no consideration for my wishes if they are opposed to those of our host," she said. "Do you think for one moment I should ever have come to this hateful house if I had had my own way?"

"Why do you call it a hateful house?"

"Because I detest and loathe the man who owns it," she replied with feeling. "I would rather work my fingers to the bone, than place myself under any obligation to him."

They had passed through the lodge gates, and were walking briskly along the track that led through the forest. Clayton had trodden that same way last night before his encounter with the dwarf. He turned with a look full of surprise and enquiry to his companion. There was a bright spot of colour upon each of her cheeks, and the wind had drawn down long wisps of her fair hair from under

the tam-o'-shanter she wore. The tight white jersey she wore brought into full relief the splendid curves and lines of her figure. She had never seemed so altogether lovely and lovable to him as she did at that moment.

"Verna. Will you trust me, dear?"

His hand rested upon her arm, making her pause, and they faced each other in the wonderful silence and solitude of the Christmas morning. A troubled look had come to her face as she heard his question.

"Yes," she replied. "I will trust you because I love you. Where perfect love is given, perfect confidence must follow also."

He drew her to him, and she raised her face to receive his kiss upon her willing lips. For one moment he pressed her close to him. Then he loosed her.

"Why do you hate Christopher Moreland?" he asked.

She shuddered, and drew back from him.

"That is the one question I cannot answer," she said in a low voice.

"But you have just said that you trust me."

"So I do—entirely and absolutely. But my answer to your question would involve others besides myself. I—I dare not tell you what I know about that man. Perhaps some day I shall be free to do so, but not yet." She looked earnestly up into his face as she spoke. "Lawrence dear, a perfect confidence between us must be mutual. Will you trust me as loyally as I trust you?"

He smiled back at her, but there was a leaden weight at his heart as he did so.

"Dearest, I would trust you if the whole world were against you," he replied. "I only want to be strengthened and helped to do what is best for yourself. But tell me one thing. Your answer need not incriminate either yourself or others. Is the cause of your silence in any way affected by the influence of a—*dwarf*?"

With a low gasp of terror she shrank further from him.

"Oh, my God!" she sobbed. "Have you seen him?"

"Yes, I have seen him, and spoken to him several times. He was here last night."

"Last night!"

"Yes, I met him in the drive as I returned from Ardley. It was a nasty experience, and I hope it will not happen again."

"This is terrible," the girl whispered. "Will you tell me all you know about that little devil? You cannot guess how much it means to me."

But Clayton shook his head.

"No," he replied. "I cannot do that at present. I must ask you to trust me as fully as I am going to trust you. We are both mixed up in some horrible mystery which I for one do not pretend to understand. But I am determined, at all costs, to save you from any possible danger or harm, and I shall be absolutely reckless in my methods. There is only one other question I must ask you, Verna, and it is essential that I should have a reply. Everything depends upon your answer."

"What is your question?"

"Are you going to marry Christopher Moreland?"

"No—no," she gasped. "I would sooner kill myself than do so."

"But you say it is your father's wish that you should, and you must obey him."

"No, I will not—I will not, though in that matter he is entirely under Moreland's control."

"In what way?"

She shivered and turned away.

"I do not know. I dare not ask."

"Why?"

"Because I am afraid of my father and—and the other man."

"Which other man? Do you mean Christopher Moreland?"

"Yes," she answered in a low voice.

"Are you also afraid of—Harris?"

She glanced up into his face with a look of enquiry.

"Who is Harris? I do not know whom you mean."

It was Clayton's turn now to show his surprise and embarrassment. For one instant the thought flashed across his mind that the girl was not acting honestly to him, but he dismissed it at once as their eyes met.

"I mean the dwarf."

Verna suddenly stood still in front of him, with her hands clenched tight at her sides, and a look of indescribable horror came to her face. Her cheeks were very pale now, and she drew in her breath with quick, irregular gasps.

"Oh!" she panted. "Then that is the name you know him by! Who told it to you?"

"He told me himself. At least, he gave me his card with that name upon it."

"Does any one else know him by that name, except yourself?"

"Christopher Moreland certainly does," Clayton replied, "for Harris is a sort of tenant of his, and occupies a flat opposite to the one where he lives in London. I also believe your father is not unacquainted with him. But, if his name is not Harris—what is it?"

She raised one hand to her eyes, as though to shut some hateful vision from her sight.

"Dearest," she whispered. "It seems as if our love and confidence in each other are destined to be bound up in secrecy. I—I cannot answer that question. But I will tell you this. If ever Satan walked this earth, concealing his devilish work in human shape, he is doing so now, in the guise of—that dwarf. You must always be prepared for some frightful tragedy whenever he is near. You must always be thoughtful of your own safety, and the safety of others. More than this I dare not tell you."

"Do you think he is hanging about the place here?" Clayton asked uneasily. The evident fear and sincerity of the girl troubled him more than he could express in words, and the proposal of Harris in the drive upon the previous night was still fresh in his mind.

"There is nothing to prevent his turning up at any moment," she exclaimed, "but he will not dare show himself during the daytime. You say you met him here yesterday evening?"

"Then I shall take care in future never to go about at night unarmed," Clayton said grimly "The next time he forces his attentions upon me, I shall shoot him like a dog, and risk the consequences."

They turned to retrace their steps towards the house, and few words passed between them till they reached the lodge gates. But there still remained one or two questions which Clayton wished to put to the woman beside him. It was necessary that he should know as much as possible about this mystery in which so many people, including himself, were involved. This might be his last chance of speaking to the girl alone, and he wanted to learn as much of the truth as she was free to disclose before Athol M'Lean arrived at The Nunnery, and a definite scheme of action was decided upon.

"Tell me, Verna," he said, as they passed through the open gates. "Do you know Lord Orsett well?"

"No," she replied without hesitation. "I had never seen him before, till we met here in Christopher Moreland's house. Why do you ask?"

"Only for information. Is he a friend of your father's?"

"Not that I know of. They may have had business transactions together, but neither Lord Orsett nor Lady Anna has ever visited at our house."

"Now, I am going to ask you a very important question, and I hope for all our sakes that you will answer it—if you can do so."

She trembled slightly, but looked bravely up into his face.

"What is it?"

"Do you know of any reason why this dwarf should desire his lordship's death? Would he benefit if such a misfortune occurred?"

"I can answer your question quite truthfully," she replied, "but, at the same time, I shall be deceiving you. Lord Orsett's death would not benefit the dwarf in any way. I think I can honestly say that the two men have never met. I mean his lordship and—and the dwarf."

"Verna! How can you be deceiving me if you answer my question truthfully?"

She was about to speak, when the figure of Myles Rossitter was seen coming slowly down the drive towards them, and all further private conversation between them was impossible.

CHAPTER XIX

"IT is the most extraordinary story I ever heard. If what you tell me is true, and not the result of disordered nerves, I can only say that the sooner your friend Moreland puts the matter in the hands of the police, the better it will be for all parties concerned."

Athol M'Lean stood in Clayton's sitting-room with his broad shoulders leaning against the mantelpiece and a huge pipe between his lips. He had arrived at The Nunnery early in the afternoon, and had soon become popular with the other guests in the house. His good-nature and limitless fund of anecdote had made him a very pleasant addition to the party. He was a well read man and well travelled, and he had an artist's power of description, which commanded attention and interest. He had already been given one sitting by Verna Rossitter, and was enthusiastic about her charm and beauty. He immediately won Lady Anna's heart by promising to send a couple of sketches to a forthcoming bazaar in aid of her Friendly Girls. The two Miss Dixons were loud in their praises about him, because in doing so they were echoing the sentiments of their chaperon. His lordship's settled expression of boredom faded into one of interest and appreciation when he found that the

new arrival was a keen golfer and motorist. The only person with whom M'Lean did not feel upon comfortable terms of acquaintance at the end of that first day of his visit to The Nunnery was Myles Rossitter. From the moment of their introduction the great financier had—more by his manner than his conversation—shown that he was suspicious of some ulterior motive in M'Lean's presence in the house, and had avoided him in a subtle way which was only noticed by the artist himself, who treated such behaviour with true Bohemian indifference.

It was not till the rest of the party had retired to their rooms that the two friends found an opportunity of having a private chat together. As soon as they had reached his apartments and were sure of not being disturbed, Clayton began to unfold the remarkable experiences which have already been chronicled in these pages. M'Lean listened in silence till the complicated narrative was ended. Not once did he interrupt the speaker. At last Clayton leaned back in his chair and asked him his opinion upon the situation. The answer to the question has already been recorded.

"But, my dear fellow," Clayton exclaimed, "I assure you it *is* true, and not due to any distorted nerves. I admit there was some ground for your suspicions when I found the dead man in my London rooms, though I still maintain that every detail I gave you at that time was absolutely correct. I know I was a wreck and thoroughly unstrung, but that had been my condition for some time owing to financial and other worries. I have met that little devil on two occasions since I have

been in this house, when I was in perfect health and amid entirely new surroundings."

M'Lean turned to the mantelpiece and knocked the ashes from his pipe against the shelf.

"Look here, Lawrence," he said, "I want, as far as possible, to regard the facts of this case from the same standpoint as you see them, and I am trying hard to do so. But for the life of me I cannot persuade myself that what you have told me here to-night really did happen,"

"Good Lord, man! And why not?"

"Well. Let me take the four occasions when you say that this dwarf Harris has presented himself to you. I want you to consider them quite impartially, as though you were an entirely disinterested party, like myself. Let us go through them *seriatim*, and briefly, from the point of view which would naturally be taken by any outside person who heard what you have just told me."

"Forge ahead then," Clayton said, with a touch of irritation in his voice. It seemed extraordinary to him that he should meet with so much scepticism with regard to facts upon which he had no doubt whatever in his own mind. "Let me hear your views."

"We must go back to the time when the dwarf first introduced himself to your notice in the fog outside Myles Rossitter's house in Berkeley Square. I accept your statement of that event, for you not only possess his card in evidence of the fact, but you have also been to his rooms in Acton Chambers. It is also supported by the conversation you had on Christmas Day with Miss Rossitter, and by the

previous effect your reference to him had upon her father when you returned to him the diamonds you found in the London cab. By the way, you state that the parcel never left your possession till you handed it to Rossitter."

"I am quite prepared to swear that is true," Clayton exclaimed.

M'Lean waved his hand with an apologetic gesture.

"My dear Lawrence, the very words you have just used show the condition of mind you must have been in at the time. That parcel must have left your keeping, otherwise how could the contents have been changed? There are only two possible alternatives, if you persist in what you say."

"And what are they?"

"Either the stones you returned to Myles Rossitter were the same as those you had previously examined in your rooms, or——"

"They certainly were not the same stones," Clayton interrupted hastily.

"Or else you had changed them yourself."

"That is an absurd suggestion."

"Pardon me. It is not absurd. It is the only logical deduction which admits of no contradiction. However, the question about the diamonds is a side issue, with which we can deal later on. It has nothing to do with the main point, which I wish to emphasize. This refers entirely to the dwarf Harris. Now, having indisputable evidence that there is such a person, I come to the four occasions when you met him after his first introduction to you. We must also place these events upon a very different level from the mere fact of his existence."

"Why so?"

"Because the one reality is already proven—namely, the actual individuality of the man. The other ones are—so far as outside critics are concerned—merely a matter of conjecture."

"But I know they did actually happen. I will take my oath they did."

"Perhaps so," M'Lean replied laconically, "but a Court of Law would require something more convincing—though no less reliable—than your oath. It would ask for proof. That is just what you cannot give. You are unable to produce one single piece of evidence to show that what you have told me has actually taken place."

"But—"

"No. Let me take these four events in their proper order, and deal with them as they strike me, and as they would strike any other man, with the exception of yourself. You admit that, for some time previous to your first meeting with the dwarf, you had been in a bad condition of health, that your nerves had become unstrung by private worries, so it is only reasonable to surmise that your brain had become particularly sensitive to the influence of any unusual experience. Your story is, that upon your return to your chambers that night you found the body of a dead man upon the floor. A few moments after your discovery, you say the dwarf was watching you from the open doorway, and, of course, finds you in an exceedingly compromising position. After some conversation with him (during which the corpse is still upon the ground), he falls asleep in one of your chairs. You leave the room, and double lock

the door, taking the key in your pocket. After making your statement to the police (who at the inquest confirmed the fact that you were in a very excited condition of mind), you return to your chambers with a doctor and a constable. You find the door still locked, but the room is empty. Both the dwarf and the body have disappeared." M'Lean paused, and puffed at his pipe for a few moments in silence. "Well, any impartial and disinterested person can only come to the conclusion that the whole affair was a delusion, due to the condition of your mind at the time. I cannot offer any other explanation to it."

"But the body was found in the downstair room on the following day," Clayton said eagerly. "How could it have come there, if my story is a delusion?"

"You remember, at the inquest, you were unable to swear upon oath that the body was the same which you say you found in your room."

Clayton remained silent, and M'Lean resumed his criticism.

"You maintain that the dwarf paid a second visit to your rooms, and the conditions of that visit very much resemble the first. According to your story, it was again very late at night when you found him there. It was also after your return from seeing me, when we had spent all our time discussing your past experiences and future prospects, in both of which topics the dwarf played an important part. You were still in an excited and—if I may say so without offence—an ill-balanced state of mind. You had secured the post of secretary which you now hold. This increased your chances of a marriage with Miss

Rossitter. Naturally your thoughts were centred upon that idea, and you could not free yourself from the suggestion which you declare the dwarf had made to you upon the subject. Therefore, the personality of Harris was uppermost in your mind when you reached your chambers, and you became convinced that you actually found him there."

Again M'Lean paused to re-light his pipe. Again did Clayton remain silent, offering no opinion upon what was being said to him by his friend.

"Now we pass to the third occasion, when the dwarf visited you," M'Lean continued. "It was after you had arrived here, and you say it happened in the room next to the one where we are now. Again, it occurred in the middle of the night."

"To be exact," Clayton interrupted, "it occurred during the early hours of the morning."

"The actual moment of the alleged apparition is of no material importance. The fact remains that you had been asleep, and were suddenly awakened. You had been writing late at your diary, and your brain was naturally obsessed with thoughts of what had recently happened. In what you had been writing, the dwarf again played an important—if not the most important—part. You state that, upon this occasion, he made the diabolical proposal that you should assassinate Lord Orsett. Yet, before you had time to give a definite answer to his remarkable suggestion, you fell asleep again. You can give no explanation as to how he entered or left your room, for the door was locked. Again, in your conversation with Miss Rossitter, she distinctly told you that, as far as she knew, Harris could derive no

personal benefit from the death of his lordship, apart from the fact that they had never met each other. So the probability of the story concerning this third apparition is—like the previous ones—as lacking in reason as it is in probability."

Clayton sat silent and uneasy. The logic of his friend's arguments was obvious to him, but he had the unalterable conviction that what he had spoken was the truth.

"Go on," he said wearily. "I cannot contradict you, though I know you are entirely wrong in your conclusions. I can only repeat that I have told you exactly what really did happen. Unfortunately, I am the only person who knows that it is so."

"We now come to the fourth and the last occasion, when you say you met the dwarf," M'Lean continued. "It took place upon Christmas Eve. You left this house after a dinner at which, judging from to-night's experience, the supply of good wine had been generous and full-bodied. The rooms had been heated, as well as the brains of the guests. You had just written to me, asking me down here. Again, you must have had in your mind what you have been telling me to-night. Once more, the mystery of the dwarf was probably uppermost in your thoughts. You went out of this heated house into a dark and frosty night. On your return, you say you met this phantom of your imagination, and he renewed his vile proposal to you, offering the same bribe as before. There was a struggle, and you—you, a strong, active man, were brought to the ground by this deformity in human shape. When you recovered consciousness, you were in bed—here in the next room." M'Lean

blew a great puff of smoke from between his lips. "Man alive! Do you think anybody who had not been present on such an occasion would for one moment believe such a tale? If, for the sake of argument, the dwarf had got the better of you, how in the name of fortune could he have brought you back into this house, and up to your room, when he is not one of the guests here? The situation is impossible." Then the artist's voice dropped to a softer note as he went on. "You must not think, Lawrence, I am trying to prove you are a liar," he said with a laugh. "I only want to show you how difficult it is for me—as it would be for any other man—to accept your version of these affairs as they are presented by you. If you were able to produce one particle of evidence in support of your assertions, it would be hard to believe it without very careful investigation. But you cannot produce any proof at all."

Clayton knew that this was so, that every reasonable argument that could be brought forward must be opposed to the facts as he knew them to be.

"Then do you propose that nothing shall be done in the matter?" he asked desperately. "Knowing what I do, am I to let things drift on, and trust to luck that no serious tragedy takes place?"

"No," M'Lean replied brusquely. "I propose nothing of the sort. If, as you say, there is a chance of the dwarf hanging about this place, with the intention of carrying out the crime he suggested to you, we must be on the watch. Personally, I do not think it will be any good, but at any rate it will

afford you an opportunity of proving that there is some truth in what you have told me, and, if that be the case, we shall be upon the spot when the crisis occurs."

"Can you suggest any definite plan of action?"

"Yes, I can. If anything is going to happen at all, I believe it will be either on the New Year's Eve or during the early hours of the following morning. Let me see. Next Friday is the first day of the new year. Well, we must keep a careful vigil during Thursday night. If your dwarf does pay us a visit, I promise you he shall not escape without giving a very full account of his behaviour to me."

"He is the very devil to deal with," Clayton said, as he nodded approval of his friend's plan, "and we ought to manage him between us."

"He may be the devil himself in spirit," M'Lean said with a curt laugh, "but if he is in bodily form, I shall not be afraid to tackle him. I do not for a moment think he will turn up, but I am quite willing to be prepared for all—or any—contingencies."

"There are several cases of revolvers and cartridges in the gun-room downstairs," Clayton said. "Lord Orsett's room is the large one at the end of the gallery, and is rather isolated. Moreland asked me to put him there, as it is the best sleeping apartment in the house, and he says his cousin likes plenty of space."

As soon as M'Lean had finished his pipe, he prepared to take his leave. It was already long past midnight, and he was sleepy with the change of air from his London studio.

"I say, old man," he said, as he turned to leave

the room. "I suppose you know your way pretty well about this house. I wish you would come and show me to my quarters. I'm hanged if I can find them myself, and I forgot to bring a candle."

"Certainly," Clayton replied, rising and fetching a light from the table where several candles stood. "As a matter of fact, this part of the building is easy to get about in, for only half of the house is furnished. At present we could not put up another guest without getting a further supply of things. The greater part of the rooms are used for storing the treasures which Moreland picks up abroad, and the other ones are empty. Come this way."

As they passed through the door into the passage M'Lean paused with an artist's true appreciation of antiquity, to pass his hand down the oak panelling of the wall.

"My word! This is a splendid old door," he whispered. "I wish I had one like it for my studio at home. I should then know that my things are safe while I am away."

"Yes. All the fittings of the rooms here are old and massive," Clayton replied. "It is very quaint and mediæval to look at, but it has its drawbacks. Even now, after being here all these weeks, I never shut my windows day or night, unless there is a gale on. I cannot stand the noise of things being blown about. This is your room, the first on the right." Clayton dropped his voice to a whisper, as he raised his hand and pointed to a narrow archway near them, through which all was darkness. "That is the gallery I was telling you about. Lord Orsett's room is at the end of it."

"And where does our host sleep?"

"His apartments are in a passage similar to this one, but on the other side of the landing."

"Good. Well, thanks awfully, old fellow. You might come in and give me a light. I do not want to tumble into a bath or something, and the fire is sure to be out by this time."

Clayton led the way into his friend's room, and lit the candles upon the dressing-table.

"I should lock my door, if I were you," he said, as he held out his hand. "I would be sorry if you had the same experience as I had."

"Certainly not. I am not going to lock anything. I do not care how many dwarfs or devils—or saintly Abbesses—come and visit me. They will have to make a jolly good row, for I am a heavy sleeper, and most awfully tired. Good-night, Lawrence. Thanks for seeing me safe home. I should never have found my way alone in this barrack of a place."

Clayton hurried back to his room, feeling more at ease than he had done for some time. It was a great relief to feel he had a friend like Athol M'Lean in the house, in spite of his disbelief of what had been told him that night.

"Perhaps New Year's Eve will prove that I am right after all," he thought, as he slipped between the sheets. "I hope it will for my sake—and for Verna's."

CHAPTER XX

DURING the next few days a more comfortable feeling of *camaraderie* seemed to spread among the members of the party assembled at The Nunnery. Whether it was due to M'Lean's personality, or because they were all waking up to the fact—though rather late in doing so—that they were passing through the most festive season of the year, and should indulge in a fuller appreciation of it, would be difficult to say. But the party certainly became more cheerful and sociable as time went on. Even Myles Rossitter unbent in his attitude towards Clayton, and appeared anxious to atone for his former rudeness in ignoring his presence. Moreland's health, after spending Christmas in bed, had taken a turn for the better, and he mixed more with his guests than he had done during the first days of their visit. Perhaps the only two people who did not give themselves readily to the pleasures of the season were Verna Rossitter and Lawrence Clayton. More than once during those days, when they were gathered together in the drawing-room of an evening, they would cast anxious glances at each other, as though expecting some sudden trouble or disaster which never came.

It was also at this time that an acquaintance sprang up between Lord Orsett and Clayton that

eventually ripened into a friendship which lasts till the present day. Possibly this more intimate companionship would never have started on either side, had the other men of the party been more congenial to either of their tastes. But his lordship made no pretence at concealing his opinion that his cousin, Christopher Moreland, was not only a crank, but an uninteresting crank as well. It was only in compliance with his sister's wishes that he had consented to come to The Nunnery, for she told him it was his duty to sacrifice himself at least once a year to visiting the relative who, failing his own marriage and issue, would some day succeed to the title and estates. Most of M'Lean's time was devoted to his canvas and brushes upstairs, and he rarely appeared except at meals. A few days' association with Myles Rossitter had not impressed the millionaire favourably upon his lordship's notice. Being a Tory of the old school, and having inherited a deep rooted suspicion towards all self-made men with colossal fortunes, he had first taken a passive dislike to him, which had gradually simmered down to a feeling of well-bred tolerance. Lord Orsett detested the man who was a society sycophant. He never met such people in the stately houses where he visited, nor in his own home—over which Lady Anna presided with such gracious dignity.

This was one of the few faults which Verna Rossitter grudgingly admitted to be part of her father's character. He dearly loved a title, and he advertised his affection for them whenever he had an opportunity of doing so. The girl had always generously ascribed this weakness of her parent to

the business connections he had with wealthy—but not very distinguished—members of the nobility, which in the course of his long professional career had been numerous and varied.

So it came about that Lord Orsett and Lawrence Clayton had been thrown a good deal into each other's society, and the more they saw of each other the stronger did their friendship grow.

The two men had been for a long walk together to one of the many beautiful and historic places which abound in that southern part of England, and they were sitting in the private room of a picturesque Sussex inn, having tea. So far, his lordship had made no reference to his cousin, and Clayton was surprised when he suddenly introduced the subject without any apparent motive. Their conversation, had been entirely devoted to travel and to sport.

"I cannot make my cousin, Christopher Moreland, out," Lord Orsett said, as he cut his third large slice from the home-made loaf in front of him. "Why on earth did he go and buy that rabbit warren of a place is what beats me. He is never well there, and the house is much too large for a bachelor. Besides, he has got very decent diggings in London."

"He goes abroad a good deal, does he not?" Clayton asked. He wanted if possible to find out more than he at present knew about his employer.

"That makes it all the worse. I believe he does spend a good deal of time—and probably a good deal of money as well—at foreign spas and other places, drinking those beastly waters which do not

do him any good. That is all the more reason why he should content himself with one home, instead of buying a great, gloomy, draughty place like The Nunnery. Great Scott! Fancy any man who is sane and sober taking a place with a name like that!"

"I do not think he comes down here often," Clayton said. "He told me he uses the unfurnished rooms for storing the things he buys abroad."

"That is all moonshine," Lord Orsett exclaimed impatiently. "There are plenty of good warehouses in London where he can store his rubbish if he wants to. But why does he waste his money over such trash? Have you seen all these wonderful treasures?"

"I have seen a good number of them, but not all. He has promised to show them to me later on."

"He has never offered to do so to me, for I expect he is ashamed to exhibit them to anybody who cares about art. I do not believe he has got a single thing worth a brass farthing."

"Oh, yes, indeed he has," Clayton said. "I have not been over the big room where he keeps the most valuable ones, but many of the unfurnished apartments are full of pictures and furniture and china. He has some nice things in London as well."

"I would not give him a five pound note for the lot," his lordship said irritably. "No, not if he threw in his old Nunnery as well."

"That is a very safe offer," Clayton laughed. "He thinks no end of his collection, and I doubt if he would accept any price for it."

"He might just as well chuck his money into the

gutter for all the good it will be to him. He knows perfectly well that if he outlives me he is the next in succession to my property and estates. He will have quite enough to do to look after them without any—Nunneries."

"You may marry."

"I shall never marry," his lordship said, and Clayton noticed a new note in his voice. "Of course I ought to do so for the sake of the family, and my sister is very keen about it. But the time for that sort of thing is past, as far as I am concerned."

"I hope not. You are still in the prime of life, and I trust you have many years before you. A man is never too old to marry, if he wants to."

"And seldom too young," Lord Orsett said quietly. "No, my dear sir. It takes two people to make a bargain, and—well, the only bargain I ever wanted to make in the matrimonial market was lost many years ago."

There was a touch of sadness in the man's voice, and Clayton felt he had unintentionally struck a personal and private note in his companion's life which was not meant for the outer world to hear.

"I am sorry," he said simply. "I should have liked to think it was otherwise."

Lord Orsett held out his hand, and Clayton gripped it warmly. From that moment there sprang up a feeling of friendship and of mutual understanding between them which has outlived the years.

On their return walk to The Nunnery a new sense of intimacy seemed to have arisen, and Lord Orsett

learned many details of Clayton's past life which the narrator never thought he would have confided to his companion when they started on their journey.

"There is one thing I wish you could arrange for me during the rest of my stay here," Lord Orsett said, as they neared their destination. "Do you think you could change my bedroom? I do not want to trouble my cousin about the matter as he has plenty of other things to worry about. Besides, you are a sort of A.D.C. to His Excellency, so I thought you might get it done for me without anybody being the wiser."

For a few moments Clayton was silent. He was wondering, with a feeling of keen anxiety, whether his lordship had experienced a similar ghastly visit from the dwarf as that which had been paid to himself. He glanced furtively at his companion, but the expression upon his face conveyed nothing.

"I hope you have not been disturbed while you have occupied that room?" he asked.

"On the contrary, I have been exceedingly comfortable, thanks to your excellent arrangements. But it is rather a long way off from my sister's apartment, and it is one of the old customs of our childhood that I should look her up and see she is all right before I turn in. I always have a cigarette in my own room while I am undressing, then I slip on a dressing-gown and go round to her for a few minutes while my man is putting things in order. The walk along that long gallery is rather a cold job at this time of year, so I thought if I could have a room in the same passage as Lady Anna it would be a great convenience to both of us." He turned

with almost a boyish laugh, and the expression upon his face made him look twenty years younger. "It must seem a very absurd request to make, but my sister and I are great pals, and we like to keep up these old habits of our childhood."

"Not at all," Clayton replied. "I will certainly arrange something for you which will be more convenient. I wish you had mentioned this to me sooner."

"Oh, that is all right," his lordship said pleasantly. "But I do not want my cousin to be bothered about it. You can manage that for me?"

"Yes. You are going to stay on here for another week, are you not?"

"Probably. I am leaving all our plans at present to my sister."

It was almost dark by this time, and they were passing the very spot upon which Clayton had had his encounter with the dwarf. The remembrance of that event suddenly put an idea into his mind, and he smiled grimly to himself.

"I will have your room changed to-morrow morning," he said, "and see that the alteration is not mentioned to your cousin. Will you give the necessary instructions to your servant?"

"Yes. I will see to that. Thanks very much."

During dinner that evening both Verna Rossitter and M'Lean noticed the curious look that had come to Clayton's face. He spoke but little, and he seemed to avoid both of them in the drawing-room afterwards.

The girl came to his side, as they were separating for the night, and whispered into his ear.

"Has anything happened? You do not look yourself to-night."

He shook his head as he felt the warm pressure of her fingers on his hand, but there was a troubled look in her eyes as she turned away to mount the great oak staircase.

Half an hour later Clayton betook himself to the billiard-room, where Lord Orsett and M'Lean were busy over a game. Myles Rossitter was sitting on the corner seat of a raised dais near the fire, with a cigar in his mouth and a whisky and soda upon a small table beside him. Clayton crossed the room and sat down next to the millionaire, who greeted him with a strained smile. The apartment was a large one, and they could talk without being overheard by the two players.

Ever since their last meeting in London, at the mansion in Berkeley Square, there had been an uncomfortable restraint between the two men. Clayton still smarted under the insults he had then received from Rossitter, while apparently the mystery of the changed diamonds remained unsolved. But upon this occasion he had a special reason for ingratiating himself with the great financier, and he forced a pleasant expression to his face as he took a seat beside him.

The first exchange of remarks between them was not of a very interesting nature, for they were entirely devoted to good-humoured criticisms about the play going on in front of them. Both Lord Orsett and M'Lean were experts at the game, and the contest was an exciting one. As soon as M'Lean, who was some twenty points ahead of his opponent, reached

his second hundred, Clayton leaned back slightly so as to bring him nearer to the man at his side.

"I have a favour to ask of you, Mr Rossitter," he said in a low voice. "I wonder if you will grant it?"

"That entirely depends upon what the favour is," the millionaire replied in a not very friendly tone.

"It has nothing to do with myself," Clayton continued, ignoring the manner of his companion. "It is a favour you can do to Lord Orsett — not to me."

The expression upon Rossitter's face immediately changed to one of studied interest, and he glanced at the smart, athletic figure which was then leaning over the table, taking a careful calculation of the angle at which he had to play.

"Why does not his lordship ask it himself?"

Clayton laughed lightly.

"As a matter of fact, he does not know I am doing it for him. He wishes me to make a slight arrangement for his comfort here, in which I find that only you can help me."

Rossitter sipped his tumbler thoughtfully, and, while he did so, his eyes glanced suspiciously at the man beside him.

"What is it?"

"He is anxious to have his bedroom altered during the rest of his visit to The Nunnery. Unfortunately, all the other furnished apartments are already disposed of, and the only thing I can do is to ask if you would have any objection to exchanging rooms with him. I would gladly give up my own," Clayton added quickly, "but it adjoins my private study, where I do my secretarial work for our host, and where I keep all my papers. Then I thought of

asking the favour of M'Lean, but his room is also connected with another one, which he has turned into a studio, and where—as you know—he is painting your daughter's portrait. All the other available apartments are occupied by the ladies—or by the servants."

Rossitter considered the request in silence before he spoke.

"Why does Lord Orsett wish to change his room?"

Clayton repeated almost word for word what his companion had told him that afternoon during their walk together.

"His lordship is also particularly anxious that the matter should not be mentioned to his cousin, Mr Moreland. He would be much distressed if his host thought that everything had not been arranged for the complete comfort of his guests. I had to see to all the details, but, of course, I could not anticipate such a difficulty as this, not knowing either Lord Orsett or his sister."

"I shall be very glad to do anything in my power that will add to his lordship's convenience," Rossitter said with gracious pomposity. "You can have our rooms changed by all means, only I should like to know where I am to be located, and also that the alteration is made known to my servant."

"Thank you very much," Clayton said with a sigh of relief, and, had not the light under the green shades been so concentrated upon the table, Rossitter might have noticed a faint smile come to the corners of his lips. "I will see that the necessary arrangements are made to-morrow morning, and I

hope you will not be inconvenienced by the change. I must also ask you not to mention the matter to Mr Moreland."

"Certainly not, if that is his lordship's wish. Besides, it is hardly of sufficient importance to refer to."

"By Jove! That was a good stroke!" Clayton exclaimed, deftly changing the subject of their conversation, and pointing to the table, where M'Lean had just scored a remarkably good round-the-table cannon. "I wish I could play the game like that."

"It is not easy to play any game with success," Rossitter said, with the suspicion of a sneer in his voice, "unless you possess a clear head—and a very steady hand."

Clayton took no notice of the veiled insult implied by the words, though he accurately guessed to what they referred. But he had got his favour granted, and he was too much pleased with himself to take offence.

"At any rate, I have saved Orsett's life," he thought, as he helped himself from the decanter upon the table to hide the satisfaction upon his face. "If that little devil, Harris, tries any of his hellish tricks on New Year's Eve, he will find he has got the wrong man to deal with."

CHAPTER XXI

THE last day of the old year was bright and clear with wintry sunshine. A white frost had left its mantle of shimmering glory upon the forest, and the open stretches of moorland scintillated in the yellow light, as though a fairy net of jewels had been cast with a lavish hand upon the bracken and gorse bushes. It was one of those perfect days which rarely come to our English winters, and are therefore all the more appreciated.

Most of the guests at The Nunnery had motored to Brighton for lunch, and were not expected back till late in the afternoon. Only three of them had remained behind. They were Verna Rossitter, Athol M'Lean, and Lady Anna. The first two people mentioned were devoting their time to the portrait, which was rapidly growing into a beautiful work of art, under the delicate influence of the artist's genius. Lady Anna, in spite of her declared intention of writing letters all day, was shrewdly suspected of being much concerned over her duties as chaperon. Clayton was busily engaged in his room upstairs, writing letters for his employer, letters which struck him as being even less necessary than those which usually occupied his time and attention during the mornings. Moreland had gone to London upon business, and would not return till the evening.

"How would you like to make your home here, Miss Rossitter? I wonder if the place appeals as much to you as it does to me."

It was M'Lean who put the question, as he stepped back from his canvas, and looked critically at the painting in front of him.

"I should hate it," the girl replied. "Nothing on earth would induce me to live here."

"I am surprised to hear you say so. You have travelled so much, and seen so many interesting places, that I should have thought The Nunnery would have appealed very strongly to your love of the beautiful."

She shook her head emphatically, but immediately regained her former position. The movement did not escape M'Lean's notice.

"I see nothing beautiful in it," she said. "It is a gloomy, stuffy house, and full of horrible associations."

"Of course it is haunted?" he asked lightly, with a glance at the face in front of him. The look was hardly necessary, for he was then at work upon another part of the picture.

"I suppose most places of this kind have some such reputation," she replied.

"I hope you have not been troubled with any ghosts during your visit to The Nunnery?"

"No," she answered. Then she added quickly — "Have you?"

He gave a slight upward movement of his shoulders, and put his head upon one side, as his gaze wandered once more from the canvas to the girl he was painting.

"I think that anybody of an artistic, or highly strung temperament is always susceptible to psychic influences in a place like this," he said slowly. "Perhaps they are on the look-out for some sort of ghostly manifestation, and their imagination is apt to carry them away."

"What do you mean, Mr M'Lean?" she asked in a strained voice. "Do you imply that you have seen, or think you have seen, anything—anything uncanny in this place?"

"N-no. I cannot say I have *seen* anything uncanny while I have been here, but I got a bit of a shock last night."

Verna started violently.

"What was it? Did you see—hear anything?"

"Well, I thought I did."

"Ah!"

"But I did not put it down to any supernatural cause or effect. As I have just said, in places like The Nunnery, people are often on the look-out for something out of the common."

"What did you hear?"

"Nothing but the draught moving the tapestry outside my bedroom door, but it sounded exactly like footsteps approaching my room, and pausing there."

"What sort of footsteps?"

Her eyes were watching him intently, and her hands were clasped very tight upon her lap. M'Lean did not appear to be particularly interested in the subject of their conversation, and he did not answer her question at once.

"I do not know exactly how to describe them," he

replied. "They sounded more like the shuffling steps of some large animal, than those of a human being." He laughed, and changed the brush in his hand to one of a smaller size. Then he fixed his eyes upon those of the girl in front of him. "Look straight at me, please, Miss Rossitter."

He saw the terrified expression upon her features. Could there really be any truth in the absurd story which Clayton had told him upon the night of his arrival at this house? Was it possible that the dwarf did actually visit these dark corridors of The Nunnery by night? Of course, what he had just said to Verna Rossitter was pure invention on his part, to try and extract from her some sign of proof that what Clayton had told him was correct. What he now saw, went far to show that it was so. His friend had informed him that she knew of the existence of the man Harris, also that she had heard his story of the midnight visit to his rooms. It was evident that the girl was much agitated by what he had just told her. If Clayton's story was a mere fabrication, and she knew it to be so, what could account for her present conduct?

"The steps were slow and uncertain, and shuffled like those of an animal," she said, half repeating his own description of what he said he had heard. "Did —did you see anything?"

"I was much too sleepy to bother myself about what I knew to be a foolish fancy," M'Lean answered with a laugh, "and I was certainly not going to get out of bed to hunt for ghosts at that time of night. But it shows how easily one may be deceived. I almost persuaded myself that they were footsteps,

though my common sense told me they could not be so."

"Then what happened?" she enquired eagerly.

"Why, of course, nothing happened. I went to sleep again, and I suppose the tapestry went on flapping outside my door."

Having gratified his curiosity, though the satisfaction of doing so left him in a somewhat bewildered state of mind, M'Lean changed the subject, and began to interest his companion about the pictures which he intended to send up to the Academy next spring.

The house party did not meet in full numbers till dinner that evening. Moreland had returned in good time, so there was not a vacant seat at the table. The trip to Brighton and back had proved an unqualified success, and everybody was in the best of spirits. Even the two men who had set themselves the unpleasant duty of a long night vigil became infected with the general animation, and forgot for a time how they would spend the silent hours of the night which were before them.

But the most remarkable personality at the table that evening was the host himself. Clayton had never seen him in such spirits. His journey to London had not wearied him at all. A more healthy colour had come to his cheeks, and his eyes were bright with unusual lustre. Clayton concluded that he had received a more encouraging report from his doctor, and that he was elated in consequence. He took more interest in the conversation around his table, and led it in a way which Clayton would not have thought possible to a man

of his moods. Even the stories of the voluble M'Lean ranked second to the witty remarks and anecdotes of his host.

And, all the while, the deaf and silent servants attended to the wants of the guests with a mechanical precision which was almost uncanny. Clayton wondered how many of that cheery party, besides himself, knew the condition of those mute men, who performed their duties with such wondrous dexterity. There was something indescribably ghastly in the whole situation, but the excellent wine which was freely circulated had more effect upon his brain than did the thought of the strange position in which he found himself. Once, during that meal, the idea crossed his mind that he was gradually coming under the influence of a drug, but he quickly forgot it when he found Verna, looking supremely lovely, sitting beside him, and asking all manner of questions as to how he had spent his day, and what he was going to do on the morrow.

Some subtle electric force must have been let loose in the room that evening, for everyone was at the high pressure of excitement, and for no obvious reason. A delirious sense of abandon suddenly took possession of the party. The two Miss Dixons became nearly hysterical over some of Lord Orsett's stories, and even Lady Anna relaxed her strict sense of propriety, to join in the laughter that followed Moreland's jokes. Myles Rossitter was enjoying his dinner hugely, and took no notice of the stealthy refilling of his wine glass by the men who glided so silently round the table. Everybody felt that something was raising their spirits to an

abnormal state of exuberance, yet no one cared to consider what the cause might be.

Clayton had forgotten about his self-imposed work for the coming night. He had even forgotten the existence of the dwarf, Harris. For had not his hand met that of the girl beside him, and had she not allowed her fingers to rest in his palm without any attempt to withdraw them, while there was no mistaking the expression in her eyes when they met his ardent glance?

M'Lean's conduct would have been termed boisterous upon any other occasion at The Nunnery, but to-night he was openly encouraged in his Bohemian behaviour. He proposed toasts, which everybody drank. He entreated the "chairman" for a song, which Christopher Moreland laughingly refused to oblige him with. He made love with equal impartiality to the two Miss Dixons, which was a novelty they thoroughly appreciated.

Yes. There was undoubtedly some strange and exhilarating influence in the situation, which might have suggested sinister conclusions in the mind of any observer who was aware of the past and present histories of some of the people present.

The meal lasted longer than usual, and the hour was late when the men joined the ladies in the drawing-room. Then Rossitter proposed bridge, and M'Lean suddenly found himself at the piano with the youngest Miss Dixon, who was begging him to sing "Kathleen Mavourneen." And Clayton retreated to a far corner with Verna Rossitter, while Lord Orsett was trying to make everybody present understand that the proper, Conservative, old-

fashioned way of spending that particular night of the season was to dance the Old Year out and the New Year in.

So all the preconceived arrangements were altered, and the eldest Miss Dixon took her seat at the piano, and his lordship called upon everyone to take a partner, and set the example by leading his sister out into the hall, while the strains of the "Blue Danube" valse began to float faintly up among the dim rafters overhead.

Nobody could have said how, or when it happened, but some time before the hour of midnight struck, there was a *buffet* arranged at the far end of the great hall, behind which stood the deaf and silent servants. But, before this occurred, it was noticed that the company of dancers had been joined by no less a person than Emile himself, with his pretty, buxom, foreign wife upon his arm. And Lord Orsett's valet was dancing with Verna Rossitter's maid. It was all like a transformation scene in a pantomime without the modern stage accessories.

There was a pause in the dance, and the tall figure of the eldest Miss Dixon appeared at the open door of the drawing-room.

"It is just going to strike midnight," she said, with rather an envious look at the people in front of her.

Then a cry went up from the masculine throats.

"Where is our host? Where is Moreland?"

Emile stepped deferentially to Lord Orsett's side.

"Mr Moreland has retired to his room, my lord. He does not feel well enough to stop up so late, and he hopes you will excuse him."

A sudden cloud seemed to descend upon the assembled company. One by one the servants left the hall, and the silent watchers behind the supper table alone remained.

Then the clock in the courtyard outside began to boom out the hour. The old year was dying. A new year was being born.

A chilly draught passed through the spacious chamber, and Verna shivered as she stood at Clayton's side.

"Auld Lang Syne!" M'Lean called out in stentorian tones, but his proposal met with a very half-hearted response.

Lord Orsett, determined to maintain the best traditions of the distinguished House to which he belonged, started singing the National Anthem, though the result was a distinctly dismal one.

After the ladies had partaken of some hot soup, and the men had toasted each other in champagne, the party dispersed, quickly and silently. It was a strange ending to so boisterous and jovial a night.

Athol M'Lean had just lighted the candles in his room, when the door behind his opened gently, and Clayton came to his side.

"I have got the devil of a headache," he said, "but I think we shall have to see this job through. What do you say?"

"I am with you, all right," M'Lean replied in a low voice, "though I am in the same boat as yourself, old pal. I will swear I am not drunk, but I feel devilish like it. Look here, I think we shall be all the better for a nip out of this before we start on our prowl."

He produced a flask of generous proportions, and each man took a quaff before M'Lean put it into his pocket.

Not many minutes passed before they had secreted themselves behind the tapestry that hung in massive folds on either side of the gallery outside the room which was occupied by Myles Rossitter. They had discarded their shoes, and each man carried a loaded revolver in the pocket of his dressing gown. The house was very silent, and intensely dark. For nearly an hour they stood there, motionless and expectant.

Hark! What was that?

The folds of tapestry which decorated the gallery hung heavily down in long, wide strips. Only a chink at the end of each piece gave the men an opportunity of seeing anything beyond the material which concealed them. Low gasps of horror and surprise came from the spots where the watchers hid and waited.

From the far end of the gallery a faint light appeared. At first it seemed like a phosphorescent glow but, as it approached them, they saw it was a skilfully shaded electric lamp, and it moved barely three feet above the ground.

It was not until the light had almost reached them, that they were able to distinguish the ghastly figure who carried it. The uncertain, shuffling steps became more distinct, and the glimmer of the light was directed first on one side, then on the other. As the revolting shape passed them, M'Lean felt a cold chill pass up his spine to his brain. He could not see the face of this human animal which was so

near to him, but he saw one heavy, fleshy hand holding the lamp—he saw the hateful deformity of manhood. He even smelled the nauseating, musky odour which exuded from the body of *the dwarf*.

Clayton also watched the figure, and knew that it brought proof to the accuracy of his statements in the past. At last, and for the first time, he had a witness. His brain was quite clear now, and his gaze followed the shape as it approached the door of the room where Myles Rossitter was asleep.

The dwarf paused for a moment as he reached the end of the gallery, and the faint glimmer suddenly became a bright, white shaft of light, directed down the path he had just trod. He was evidently looking to see if he was being followed. The movement brought for an instant his figure into bold relief against the surrounding darkness. The two watchers then saw the shape and size of the creature—the trunk of the body sunk low between the hip bones—the ungainly and distorted form of his limbs—the great hairy head, which was barely supported by the slanting shoulder blades.

Before they knew he had opened the great, massive oaken door, he had passed into the darkness of the room beyond. As he did so, the heavy oaken woodwork moved back into its place with a sharp click.

A few seconds afterwards there echoed along the gallery the vibrating report of a revolver shot.

“My God! He has killed him!”

The words sprang from Clayton’s lips as he rushed from behind the tapestry. At the same

moment M'Lean sprang from his hiding-place and the two men hurried to the door.

It was unlocked and together they entered the room.

“Stand still or I fire.”

The command was given by M'Lean, who at the time was fumbling in his pocket. He was still in the open doorway, but closed it as he spoke and stood with his back to it till he had struck a match.

“Here. You light the candles,” he said to Clayton. “I will stand here with my revolver raised and ready. Anybody who moves in this room will be shot like a dog.”

His last words were spoken in a loud voice. Clayton lit a couple of candles upon the table and then went to the side of the bed. With a cry of horror he stepped back, for upon the pillow lay the bleeding head of Myles Rossitter.

“Yes, he has killed him,” he gasped. “*He has murdered Myles Rossitter.*”

CHAPTER XXII

"TURN on every light," M'Lean said sternly. "We must search this room at once and find that little devil dead or alive. I will stand here by the door till we can see more clearly what we are doing, and prevent his escape. He is hiding somewhere, so take care he does not put a bullet into you."

A ripple of mocking laughter sounded from a spot near them as he spoke, but the man at the door did not shift his position.

"Did you hear that?" Clayton whispered. "He is in this room all right."

In a few seconds the apartment was well lighted with many candles upon the mantelpiece and tables. Though it was a large one and well furnished, there were not many places where the dwarf could secrete himself except under the bed or behind the window curtains. M'Lean stepped quickly to the side of the bed and stood with the light of a candle turned full upon the face of the man who lay there. It was a horrible sight, for the blood from the wound at the side of the head was trickling down upon the white features and already congealing there. The waxen look of death had become fixed upon Rossitter's face and his jaw had dropped.

"Poor fellow. He is dead right enough," M'Lean said gravely. "Now we must find the murderer."

He glanced keenly round the room as he spoke, and his eyes rested upon the windows, over which the curtains were drawn. "This is a nasty job for both of us," he added meaningfully. "You had better examine under the bed and behind the furniture. I will tackle those windows, though I do not like the look of them at all."

With his revolver raised in his hand M'Lean crossed the room and quickly drew the curtains aside. It was a plucky thing to do, for, if the dwarf had been behind them he could have killed the man on the spot. But to his surprise and relief he found not only the dark spaces behind them vacant, but the blinds were drawn and the windows were fastened on the inside. He returned to Clayton, who was still carefully searching every possible hiding-place in the room.

"Have you looked under the bed?" he asked.

"Yes. He is not there. You can see the light through to the other side. And he is not in either of the cupboards."

"But he must be here somewhere," M'Lean said desperately. "Ah! I have it. He is up the chimney."

"That is impossible," Clayton whispered, pointing at the big fire which still smouldered on the wide stone hearth. "He would be suffocated by the smoke."

Again the low, mocking laughter sounded near them, though they could not locate the position from which it came, and an oath burst from Clayton's lips.

"Damn him. This is the work of the devil him-

self," he said, as he turned and closely scrutinized each corner of the room. "There must be a secret exit somewhere."

They began to walk slowly round the chamber, each in an opposite direction, tapping the oak panelling with their knuckles as they did so. But when they came together again their efforts had produced no satisfactory result. The wood, though thick, gave no sound to show there was any hollow place behind its dark surface.

"We must try the floor," M'Lean said. "It is impossible that even *he* could have escaped us, except through some hidden way."

They crawled on their knees over every yard of the carpet examining each inch of the floor, but without effect. As they rose to their feet Clayton straightened himself, and cast a frightened look towards the bed where the body of Myles Rossitter lay.

"He has not disappeared through the floor," he said. "He could not do so without moving the carpet and he had not time to do that. He must be in some recess behind the walls. Let us try again."

So once more they made their slow journey round that room of death, knocking each panel of the oaken wood. They even sounded the thick door to see if it was hollow, though the man they sought could not possibly have escaped by that means without being seen. But there was no sign of the dwarf, nor of any conceivable passage through which he could have gone. The chief mystery of his disappearance lay in the fact that not more than one minute had passed between the firing of the shot

and their entry into the room. Even had there been a secret opening somewhere, it would have been impossible for the murderer to reach it—to open and to close it—without discovery. He had not time to do so.

"I cannot make this out at all," M'Lean said, as he stepped softly to the bed and covered the face of the dead man with the sheet. "We have now looked everywhere, and had there been any means of escape we must have found it. I am convinced he could not have left this room between the firing of his revolver and our appearance upon the scene. It is certain he did not pass through the door, for I stood there until the lights were lit, and then we should have seen him. The windows are shut and locked upon the inside so that he could not have got out that way."

Clayton came to the side of his companion. He was white to the lips.

"He may be hiding in the bed—*with the body*," he whispered. "Will you look *there*? I—I do not think I can do it."

"He could not have got there in time," M'Lean answered, "but I will have a look."

It was a ghastly and a gruesome thing to do, but he did it bravely. He drew back the coverings that hid the corpse, and found that the bed only contained its one dead occupant. He felt under the mattress to see if it gave any possible place for hiding. The dwarf was not there.

"Well, there is only one thing to be done now," he said, as he re-covered the face of the dead man. "That is for one of us to go and awake Christopher

Moreland, and tell him what has happened." He looked anxiously at Clayton as he spoke. "Lawrence, old man, I think you had better be the one, and for two reasons. In the first place, you know where his room is situated, and I do not. In the second place, it would not do for you to be left alone in this place. You are a bit upset, and your nerves would not stand it."

"Yes, I will go," Clayton said in a low voice.

"That is right. But before you do so, you had better have another nip from this flask. It will pull you together. My nerves are stronger than yours, so drink as much as you can. I shall wait here till you come back, and you had better bring Moreland with you, and Emile also if you can find him. It would not be a bad thing to get hold of Lord Orsett as well. He has got his head screwed on straight, and would be useful on such an occasion. Here, take a pull out of this."

M'Lean handed the flask to his friend as he spoke and Clayton took a long gulp at it.

"I will leave the door open while you are gone," M'Lean continued, as they crossed the room towards it. "It will give you a feeling of security as you go down that gallery. It will also enable you to hear me, should I call out for help. Anything might happen at any moment in a devilish affair like this." He placed his hand upon the knob of the door as he spoke. "Be as quick as you can, Lawrence. I confess I do not care about the job myself, and I shall be glad to see you back again. We will have to send to Ardley for a doctor and the police as soon as possible, and put the matter in their hands."

He hesitated, and pushed violently at the door.
"Ah!"

"What is it?" Clayton asked. "Pull it towards you, Athol."

"There is no good pulling it towards me—or pushing it away. *The door is locked.*"

"Locked!"

"Yes. We are shut in here like rats in a trap," M'Lean said with an oath. "So that little fiend has escaped after all, and he has locked us into this room as well." He turned to Clayton and shook his head. "You were right when you said we had to do with the very devil himself," he added. "I did not believe you at the time, but, if ever I catch him—by God, I will wring his neck!"

"Are you sure it is locked?" Clayton asked. "Let me try it. I am more accustomed to these doors than you are."

M'Lean stepped impatiently upon one side.

"Try it by all means," he said angrily. "If you can open that door, you are a cleverer man than I take you for." He stooped and looked through the keyhole. "It is not only locked, but the key is in its socket outside. *Damn him.*"

They stood and looked at each other in silence for a few moments. Then M'Lean went to the fireplace, and gave a vigorous pull at the bell-rope which hung beside it.

"Nobody will answer you," Clayton said. "That bell communicates with the servants' hall, which is a long way from their sleeping apartments. Besides, very few of the servants could hear it, even if they were in the room."

"Why? Are they all deaf?"

"The resident servants in this house are not only deaf, but dumb as well, with the exception of Emile and his wife."

"My God! What a ghastly place to live in! But something must be done—and done at once. I will wait five minutes, and then try again."

But at the second attempt the bell-rope broke high up near the ceiling, and fell to the ground at M'Lean's feet. He stooped and picked it up.

"This has been cut," he said, holding the end of the cord towards Clayton. "We must not forget to show it to the police. It looks very much as if the whole of this matter has been arranged beforehand."

Clayton looked at the end of the rope, and nodded his head. He saw that M'Lean was right in his assumption, and he guessed who had done this thing.

"We can do nothing," he said, with a shuddering look at the bed where Myles Rossitter lay in his last sleep. "It is terrible. We must get help at once. The murderer cannot be hiding in this room, otherwise he could not have locked us in here."

"He may have had an accomplice," M'Lean said thoughtfully. He was trying to reason out the situation to himself, but it baffled him. "If that little imp of Satan has got away—and there is no reason to doubt it—then there must be some sort of exit by which we can do the same, and we must find it."

"He could escape through a much smaller space than either of us," Clayton said.

"Of course he could. He is about half our size

But what I want to know is how did he get out of this room? If there is some secret method of egress, we ought to find it. Then we might be able to enlarge it."

"The only three means of escape from here that I can think of are the door—which is locked upon the outside—the windows, which are locked upon the inside, and the chimney. Athol, do you think he is hiding up the chimney?"

M'Lean shook his head emphatically.

"No. He is not hiding there. Had he done so, how could he possibly have locked the door? The only thing is to examine the room again, and more carefully this time. We may have been a bit flurried and have passed over some hollow panel by mistake. Now, Lawrence. You take the left side of the wall and I will take the right. Are you ready?"

Once more they walked cautiously round the chamber, tapping the woodwork as they went. But the sound of their knuckles upon the panels was dull and heavy, and again proved that they concealed no space behind them.

M'Lean threw himself into an armchair near the fireplace, and let his head sink between his hands. He was deep in thought, and trying to work out some solution to this problem. All the events of the past night had been so strange and fantastic, that he wondered if he was not suffering from some horrible form of nightmare, from which he would presently wake up to find himself in bed, with a bad headache as the result of consuming too much of Moreland's excellent champagne. Clayton was examining the massive oak door. It was of the same

make and design as the one in his own bedroom, and he felt all over it. Having satisfied himself upon that point, he directed his attention to the chimney. He had not yet convinced himself that this might not prove a possible means of exit for a creature of such small proportions as the dwarf. The grate was a large one and deep, and he raked the warm grey ashes to one side of it. Then he crouched down upon his knees with a candle in his hand, and looked upwards. He at once saw that any escape in that direction was impossible. The flue only rose about eight feet above him, and then divided off into several smaller air passages on either side of it, through which not even a good-sized rabbit could have passed. With a sigh of despair he sank into a chair opposite his friend.

Suddenly a clock upon the mantelpiece struck the hour of three, and both the men started forward. Each face was ashen white, and they looked nervously towards the bed at the other end of the room, with its silent burden. The covering above the head was deeply stained with blood.

M'Lean sprang to his feet. The ghastly reality of the situation was very fully realized by him at that moment.

"Look here, Lawrence!" he said in a husky voice. "We cannot sit here and do nothing, with that dead body upon the bed. Suggest something. For God's sake, speak, and suggest something!"

Clayton looked dully across at the man in front of him.

"There is nothing we can do, but sit here and

wait," he replied. "I suppose his servant will come to call him at the usual time."

"I am not going to sit still and do nothing," M'Lean exclaimed excitedly. "Why, man alive! I should go mad if I did that." He rose from his chair as he spoke. "I will tell you what I am going to do."

"What is that?"

"I am going to try and blow out the lock of the door with our revolver cartridges. Even if I cannot do so, perhaps the noise may awaken somebody, and bring him to our help."

"You can try it," Clayton said wearily, "but I do not think it will be any use. Why, that door is nearly a foot deep of solid oak."

"Anyhow, I am going to risk it."

And he did so, but without any effect. He dared not stand too near the door, for fear of the bullets rebounding upon himself, and his hand was so unsteady that, out of the half-dozen shots he fired, only one touched the metal work round the keyhole. He put the weapon upon the table with a gesture of despair, and returned to his seat.

"You are right," he said. "There is nothing to be done now but to wait till somebody comes to us. My God! What a nasty job this is."

Once more the clock upon the mantelpiece struck the hour. Each note echoed through that room like the first tolling of a death bell. And the two men sat silent there, alone with the dead.

"Ah!"

Suddenly they both sprang up and listened, with their faces turned towards the door, and every sense keenly alert. There was the sound of footsteps

coming along the gallery towards them. Yes. There was no mistake about it. The noise of the revolver shots had been heard. Then, as though moved by one common impulse, each man shouted the word——

“Help!”

The approaching footsteps grew louder. Somebody was outside the room. There was a pause, and a breathless silence. Then the key was gently turned in the lock. The handle of the great door moved, and it was pushed slowly open.

Upon the threshold stood Christopher Moreland, leaning heavily upon his two sticks. His face was drawn and haggard, and he was dressed in a loose dressing-gown. Behind him was Emile, holding a candle in one hand, and assisting his master with the other. Moreland started as he saw the two men in front of him, and his servant supported him, with an anxious look upon his face.

“Thank God, you have come!” M‘Lean exclaimed fervently.

Moreland hesitated, and his eyes wandered slowly round the room.

“What is the matter, gentlemen?” he asked in a surprised voice. “What has happened, and why are you here at this time of night?”

“A most dastardly murder has been committed,” M‘Lean said, taking a step forward, and pointing towards the bed. “The assassin has escaped, and he locked us into this room.”

“Murder!”

The word came from Moreland’s lips like the echo of a voice a long way off.

"Yes. That man upon the bed has been most cruelly killed. We followed the assassin as soon as he entered the room, and we heard the shot fired."

Moreland raised his eyes to the speaker's face. His appearance was like that of a person walking in his sleep, and he seemed to be hardly conscious of his actions. He took a few halting steps towards the bed upon which the body lay.

"Do you mean to tell me that Lord Orsett has been murdered?"

Clayton hurried to his side.

"It is not Lord Orsett who has been killed," he said. "It is Mr Myles Rossitter."

"Who?"

Clayton drew the sheet from over the dead man's head, and lowered the candle in his hand, till the light fell upon the white, red-stained face.

"It is Myles Rossitter."

Christopher Moreland stooped for a moment over the pillow, and looked at the horrid sight it supported. Then, with a terrible cry, he fell backwards into the arms of his servant.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHEN, a few hours later, the terrible tragedy was made known to the other guests at The Nunnery, they took their departure as speedily as possible. Lord Orsett went up to his London house, and the two Miss Dixons returned to their home in Donegal in a very depressed state of mind. Lady Anna took charge of Verna, and located herself in a suite of rooms at one of the well-known hotels in Tunbridge Wells. The girl had quite broken down on hearing of the terrible fate which had come to her father, and she silently obeyed every wish expressed by her new found friend with regard to her future movements. Lady Anna would have liked to take her abroad for a few weeks to a sunnier and more cheerful country, but the police had stated that it was necessary for Verna to remain within accessible distance to the scene of the tragedy, as her presence might be required at the inquest. Christopher Moreland's health had suffered severely from the shock of what had happened in his house, and he shut himself up in his own rooms, being too unwell to see anybody. The strange staff of servants were given a month's wages, and left the place within a couple of days, and the only two guests who remained at The Nunnery were Clayton and his friend Athol M'Lean.

The murder had created a tremendous sensation not only in the neighbourhood but all over the county, and the place was besieged by reporters and press photographers. But the police had at once taken charge of affairs there, and kept the curious crowds away.

It is not necessary to record in detail what occurred at the inquest, though the circumstances of the tragedy, as well as the evidence given, were of an unusually sensational character. The three chief witnesses were Moreland, Clayton, and Athol M'Lean, but the first named of the three men could do no more than describe what he had seen when, on being summoned by his servant in the early hours of the morning, he had gone to the chamber of death. It was the statements of the other two witnesses which caused the most sensation. They were absolutely certain regarding the truth of the facts they placed before the jury, and Clayton was closely questioned with regard to his former association with the dwarf while in London. A representative from Scotland Yard was also present to give his version of the murder which Clayton insisted had been committed in his chambers. But the whole story appeared so incredible that the jury refused to accept the evidence of M'Lean and Clayton as worthy of belief. A constable had been sent to Acton Chambers to interview the man Harris, and ensure his attendance at the inquest, but a notice was found upon his door to the effect that he had gone abroad, and this evidence was corroborated by Christopher Moreland himself, who produced a letter from his sub-tenant

which he had received a fortnight ago, enclosing a cheque for his quarter's rent, and stating that he was leaving on the following day for the Continent.

To the two men most interested the verdict was entirely unsatisfactory. It was to the effect that Myles Rossitter had been murdered by some person or persons unknown, and the general public—as represented by the Press—agreed that no other conclusion was possible.

Four men sat round a table in the room at The Nunnery which Clayton used as his study. It was the day after the inquest, and they were discussing the recent crime from every possible point of view. Besides Clayton and M'Lean, there were Dr Fergusson from Ardley and the local Inspector of Police. Moreland had gone up to London as soon as his presence was no longer required, and the date of his return was uncertain.

Dr Fergusson was a short, delicate-looking man, of very reserved manner though deliberate in speech. He was the medical adviser who had been summoned to The Nunnery as soon as the murder was known outside the room where it had been committed. Like a good many other men in his profession—and in other professions as well—he had never received the recognition which his undoubted talents justified. He was clever at his work and held high medical degrees, but like Clayton he lacked the necessary quality of self-advertisement and push. So, instead of having his house in Harley Street, with a fashionable and neurotic clientèle from Mayfair and an income of many thousands a year, he had drifted down to Ardley,

where his patients were not fashionable (though many of them were quite as neurotic as their brothers and sisters in London), and his income fell far short of the desirable four figures. The Inspector was the exact opposite to the doctor in every way. He was a tall, burly man, in vigorous and robust health, very alert in manner and equally emphatic in his speech and actions. He had decided early in life to be a success in whatever profession he adopted, and he was in a fair way of becoming one.

"Were you satisfied with the verdict?"

Clayton turned to the Inspector as he put the question, and that official immediately stroked his moustache with a big, hairy hand.

"On the evidence given I do not see that the jury had any alternative," he replied. "The statements made by yourself and by Mr M'Lean, though curious and interesting, could have no influence over them."

"But it was proved that we were found in the murdered man's room by both Mr Moreland and his man-servant."

"Yes. Also that you saw somebody enter the apartment and heard the shot fired. I do not think there is any question about that," the Inspector said. "But that story about the dwarf was—well—well—gentlemen!"

The large hand was again raised to stroke the other side of the moustache, and the officer looked round the table with a smile upon his lips.

Clayton turned impatiently to the doctor, who was sitting silent in front of him.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Are you of the same opinion as the Inspector?"

"At present I have got an open mind upon the subject," he replied. "It is a very strange and mysterious affair, and I should like a little more time to think it over before I commit myself to a definite opinion."

M'Lean rose from his seat and strode to the mantelpiece to fetch his tobacco pouch.

"My own view is that the whole inquest was a bally bit of professional tomfoolery," he said. "The Coroner was a doddering old idiot, and the jury had not wits enough among them to cover a threepenny piece."

"My dear sir!" the Inspector exclaimed in a voice of dignified reproach. "I beg to differ from you. I consider, as a professional man, that the law was well represented upon this occasion."

"And I quite agree with you," M'Lean said with a sniff of indignation. "It was admirably represented."

Dr Fergusson turned towards Clayton with a slightly nervous movement.

"There is one favour I wish to ask you, in the absence of Mr Moreland. I have mentioned it to the Inspector, and he raises no objection."

"What is it?" Clayton asked. He was willing to welcome any proposal that offered a hope of throwing light upon the mystery.

"I have a friend who lives not far from here—at Crowborough, in fact—who till recently was a distinguished member of the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard. His name is well known to the Inspector here."

"I not only know the name of Mr Greatorex very well, but I have more than once had the pleasure of being associated with him in professional matters," the Inspector said pompously. "Before he retired from the Service, his name was connected with some of the best known criminal cases in Europe."

"What is his profession now?" Clayton asked.

"He has retired from active duty, and lives upon his pension," the doctor replied, "but he still occasionally interests himself in detective work, and I think his assistance in elucidating this mystery would be of the greatest possible value to all parties concerned."

"What is your proposal?"

"With your permission, I suggest that I should ask him down to spend a few days with us at Ardley. If you will allow him full opportunity of examining the scene of the crime, and to visit this house while he is my guest, I think it is possible he may be able to assist in this most unfortunate affair."

"I am sure Mr Moreland would encourage the fullest investigation," Clayton answered, "so long as it is not carried out merely in the spirit of morbid curiosity. If your friend Mr Greatorex will interest himself in the matter, I shall be very glad to place my services at his disposal. I am sure you would do the same, Athol?"

"Rather," M'Lean said gruffly. "It is about time we got somebody to look into this business who knows what he is about, and how he is going to do it. I am sick of all this professional red tape. What we want is the man who will find the rope to hang the murderer with."

The Inspector drew himself up at once, and cast a reprobating official glance at the speaker.

"I do not understand to what you refer, Mr M'Lean, when you talk about—about professional red tape," he said stiffly.

"But I do," M'Lean replied, returning the glance with interest, "and that makes all the difference. That old fool of a coroner, and those lunatics who posed as being a jury of intelligent men, did not believe a word which was said either by Mr Clayton or myself, though we were the principal witnesses. And you are no better than they were."

"My dear sir—" the Inspector expostulated, but M'Lean interrupted him angrily.

"I am not your 'dear sir,'" he said, "and I repeat that the whole of that inquest was a pantomime, and you were one of the chief clowns. What was the good of putting my friend and myself upon our oaths, if none of you believed a word we said? Did you think we were mad, or drunk, or both?"

Clayton hastened to put an end to what threatened to become a somewhat heated argument.

"Do you think your friend Mr Greatorex could spare time to come over here?" he asked Dr Fergusson.

"I am sure he would. He has nothing much to occupy him at this time of year. During the summer all his attention is given to his garden. I shall be very glad to put him up for a few nights, and could motor him here each morning while he is with us. Would that arrangement suit you?"

"Excellently," Clayton said. "I would offer to give him a room here, only we are very short of

servants at present, and each additional guest adds to the work. Mr Moreland has taken his manservant with him, and Emile's wife is the only other person in the house except ourselves, and a maid."

"I shall be delighted to entertain Mr Greatorex," Dr Fergusson said, "and there is no reason why you should be put to any trouble in the matter. With the permission of the Inspector, I think the best thing will be to leave the whole affair in the hands of Greatorex and myself."

Clayton nodded, and the Inspector gave a sign of assent.

"Have you any theory about the crime?" M'Lean asked. He liked the look of the doctor, and had formed the opinion that if anybody solved the mystery of the murder, it would be the delicate looking little medical man beside him. "I cannot make head or tail of it myself."

"Yes, I have got a theory," the doctor said slowly, "and that is why I want to consult my friend, Greatorex."

The other men round the table leaned forward eagerly, but Fergusson held up his hand though too late to stop the question which rose to their lips.

"What is your theory?"

"I cannot answer your question, gentlemen, till I have the expert opinion of Mr Greatorex," he replied gravely. "It is a matter which demands the deliberate convictions of two distinct minds—that of the detective, and that of the medical specialist."

"Why did you not place your theory before the coroner and jury?" the Inspector asked testily. "You had your opportunity then."

"Because it is only a theory which is based upon technical medical knowledge that they would not have understood, and which I should have been very reluctant to explain," the doctor replied. "My theory is merely one of deduction, and is useless unless supported by absolute proof. That proof can only be obtained by a man experienced in criminal matters. I cannot say if it is obtainable, and my theory may be all wrong."

"How soon will Mr Greatorex's services be available?" Clayton asked.

The doctor rose from his chair, and collected the papers upon the table in front of him.

"I am now going back to Ardley, and I will send him a telegram, asking him to join me to-night. If he is free, and can come, I will send you a wire to expect us here to-morrow morning." He looked at the Inspector as he spoke. "Can I give you a lift? My car is waiting at the door, and can take you home, after dropping me at the Ardley post-office."

The four men descended to the dining-room, where refreshments were spread upon the sideboard. After enjoying a glass of Madeira and a slice of cake, they went to the hall door, outside which the doctor's car was waiting.

Dr Fergusson drew Clayton on one side, as the Inspector was taking his seat.

"There is only one other thing I must ask you," he said in a low voice. "It will be best not to mention to Mr Moreland what I propose doing, at least not at present. I fear he is in a very bad state of health, judging by his appearance at the inquest, and his thoughts should be kept away as much as

possssible from the subject we have been discussing this morning. Had he been here, I should certainly have asked his permission to proceed in the matter, but, until we have something definite to work upon, I suggest that he should not be troubled with any information about what Greatorex or I are doing."

"I quite agree with you," Clayton said, as he gripped the outstretched hand. "He has, of course, been very much upset by the whole business, and, in his present health, I think he ought to be relieved as far as possible from any further anxiety."

As the car disappeared round the corner of the drive, M'Lean nudged his companion meaningly.

"The little doctor has got his head screwed on straight," he said. "Whatever his theory may be, I will bet my bottom dollar he is on the right track."

"I hope we shall see his friend Greatorex to-morrow," Clayton muttered. "The Inspector seemed to have great confidence in his capabilities as a detective."

"That man is an unmitigated ass," M'Lean said angrily. "His opinion is not worth a hayseed. Look here, Lawrence. What are your plans for this afternoon? I am your medical attendant now, and I say that you want fresh air, space, and motion. We must not let this business get upon our nerves. We have had too much of it already."

"I thought of going into Tunbridge Wells, and calling upon Lady Anna and Miss Rossitter," Clayton replied.

"The very thing. I will go with you. Have you got a car here?"

"There is one in the garage, but I am afraid the

chauffeur is in London. He drove Moreland up to town yesterday evening."

"My boy! We do not want any chauffeur," M'Lean exclaimed. "I can drive a car as well as the best of them, and will run you into Tunbridge Wells in less than no time. Where is the garage?"

Soon after lunch, the two friends were speeding away through the forest at a pace which would have been dangerous had there been any traffic upon the road. But they met nothing till they neared the town, when M'Lean slowed down the pace to one which would not have excited the mildest interest in the most provincial of policemen.

Clayton and Verna Rossitter stood in the lounge of the hotel where Lady Anna had taken up her abode, and he was being assisted into his coat by one of the hall porters. The car could be seen outside, with M'Lean at the steering wheel. A light storm of snow was drifting through the gloom of the late wintry afternoon.

"And what are your plans, Verna?" he asked, as he stooped towards the pathetic figure in its clinging black raiment. "What are you going to do? Where will a letter find you after you have left this place?"

There were tears in her eyes as she looked nervously up at him. Then she glanced down, and fingered the glittering rings upon her shapely fingers.

"Lady Anna has been awfully kind to me," she said in a low voice. "I do not know what I should have done during this terrible time without her help and comfort. I am going up to town with her in a few days."

"So soon as that?"

"Yes, I am going to stay with her and Lord Orsett till—till everything is arranged."

She shuddered, and looked away.

"Verna. You will write to me?"

"Yes, I will write."

"Often?"

"Not too often," she replied, and there was an anxious smile upon her face as she lifted her eyes to his. "There will be so many things to attend to, and—and I do not yet know what my future will be." She held out her hand and he clasped it firmly. "Lawrence. In spite of all that has happened, may I still rely upon your friendship—your love? I feel very, very lonely."

They were standing close to the door. Behind them were the shaded lamps of the luxurious lounge. In front of them the long stretch of the common, beyond which glimmered the lights of the town. The snow was coming down with increasing force, and Clayton saw the figure of M'Lean adjusting the fur rugs over the seat of the car.

"My darling!" he whispered. "My time—my thoughts—my life are yours. I only want to know how best I may dedicate them to your service. You must never feel lonely as long as I have health and strength to be near you when you need me."

The grip of their hands tightened.

"I think I shall always need you," she said.

"Thank God for that," he replied. "Good-night, Verna."

"Good-night."

CHAPTER XXIV

“ HERE he is ! ”

Clayton and M'Lean were standing in front of a blazing fire in the hall of The Nunnery. A telegram had been received an hour ago from Dr Fergusson, saying that his friend Greatorex would be with them shortly, and the sound of the motor wheels had just been heard approaching the house along the snow-covered drive.

“ Although I have not seen the gentleman, I am inclined to put my faith in him,” M'Lean said as they advanced towards the door. “ Any fellow whom the little doctor recommends is pretty sure to shape well. But, by Jove, he has his work cut out for him over this job.”

Greatorex was already stepping out of the car when the door opened, but he turned to give some directions to the driver before he came forward to meet the two men who stood upon the steps, awaiting his arrival. Clayton at once came forward, and held out his hand.

“ I am Mr Clayton,” he said, “ and this is my friend, Mr M'Lean. It is very good of you to come so far on a day like this.”

They turned back into the hall, and Clayton assisted the new-comer out of his coat and wraps. He was a short man, with mild blue eyes and

a well pointed beard. His actions were slow and deliberate. Having relieved himself of his hat and coat, he carefully folded his white scarf and placed it upon his hat.

"My trouble will be well repaid if I can be of any service to you," he said, and the mild blue eyes narrowed behind the gold-rimmed spectacles. "My friend Dr Fergusson has given me certain particulars concerning this case, which he wishes me to investigate. Beyond that I know nothing, except what I have read in the papers."

His eyes had rested with a searching look upon the faces of the men who confronted him. Now his gaze wandered upward to the distant, grim rafters of the ceiling, and the tattered flags hanging like tinted cobwebs above his head.

"Will you have some refreshments before we begin to talk matters over?" Clayton asked, as he moved towards a table in the corner, upon which had been placed some decanters and glasses. "You must be nearly perished with cold."

"Thank you. I am not cold, but it is always wise to take precautions against after effects. If you have a little hot water there I will have half a tumbler. No spirits, thank you. I prefer the water as it is."

Clayton filled half a glass from the silver kettle which was steaming above its tiny lamp, and handed it to his guest. He watched him curiously as he sipped it with evident relish. From the appearance of the man, no one would have guessed that—till recently—he had been known and feared in all the worst centres of crime in England and upon the

Continent. He looked as though his path through life had always led him through very pleasant and peaceful ways.

"I say, Lawrence, old boy," M'Lean said, "it is rather early in the day, but I am going to have a brandy and soda all the same. This infernal business has given me a craving for pick-me-ups, which I hope will not be a permanent one. My nerves have all gone to the devil, and I did not sleep a wink last night."

"It is an excellent thing in moderation," Greatorex said, as he placed his empty tumbler upon the table. "After the experiences you have recently come through, I should think you require a good many pick-me-ups, sir."

"I never felt so cheap in my life," M'Lean replied. "I hope this beastly murder will not get upon my nerves, and interfere with my work. If I had known what I was in for, new cords would not have got me down to this place."

Greatorex was slowly munching a biscuit, though his eyes were still scanning the apartment curiously. He was not far from the great oaken fireplace, and he leaned sideways to finger the carving of the wood.

"What do you propose to do first, Mr Greatorex?" Clayton asked. "We are entirely at your service, and we wish to assist you in every way."

"Quite right, Lawrence," M'Lean said, as he emptied his glass. "Quite right. What we want to see proved is the fact which we witnessed ourselves. The murder was committed by that infernal little dwarf, and could not have been done by any other person."

Greatorex wiped his lips slowly with a cotton handkerchief. Then he turned towards Clayton.

"I should like you to take me to the room where the crime took place. I understand that both you gentlemen were behind the tapestry outside the door, and actually saw the assassin."

"We saw him enter the room," Clayton said.

"And we heard the shot fired, not one minute afterwards," M'Lean added.

"Will you please take me up to that gallery, show me the exact places where you were concealed, and describe what you saw?"

"Certainly," Clayton said. "We will go there at once, if you are ready?"

"I am quite ready."

The three men started to ascend the wide staircase, when M'Lean put his hand upon the arm of the ex-detective.

"Look here, Mr Greatorex," he said. "You have heard, or read, the evidence which was given at the inquest by my friend and myself?"

"I have done both."

"Good. Well, I want you to believe that every word we then spoke was the truth. Our story about the dwarf was received first with suspicion, and then with open disbelief. Do you believe that our evidence was according to facts, or do you not? That is a plain question, and I ask for a plain answer."

Greatorex continued to mount the stairs without a pause, though M'Lean's hand still rested upon his arm.

"I am not here to answer questions," he replied

slowly. "I am here to ask them. When I have seen all I want to see, and formed my own conclusions, it will be time for you to ask whether those conclusions are correct—or not."

They reached the gallery upstairs, and Clayton pointed out the exact spots where he and M'Lean had hidden themselves on the night of the murder. He described the appearance of the dwarf as they saw him where they stood. Then they entered the room where the crime had taken place, and every detail of their ghastly vigil was given minutely. Greatorex asked no question. He stood quite still, and listened attentively.

But, while he did so, his blue eyes were watching each spot to which his companions referred—the position of the body upon the bed, the walls they had tapped to discover a possible hidden exit, the windows which had been closed and fastened on the inside, the chimney, the floor over which they had crawled to find some loose plank under the thick carpet. The whole scene was re-enacted before him, and with absolute accuracy.

The examination of the room lasted for over an hour. Then Greatorex stepped towards the men who stood beside him.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said quietly. "I think you have given me all the information I require at present, and you have done so very well—if I may be allowed to say so. Will you please leave me here, and let me follow out my own enquiries. I will join you downstairs, when I have done so. I shall then have some questions to ask you, which I have no

doubt you will be able to answer to our mutual satisfaction."

"What is your opinion now of the mystery?" Clayton asked, as they moved towards the door. "Have you formed one yet?"

The mild blue eyes flickered for a moment as they rested upon Clayton's face.

"I never form opinions till I am sure of my facts," Greatorex replied. "As soon as I am reasonably sure of my facts, then I begin to form my opinions. I shall spend an hour in this room by myself, and then I will join you downstairs. But I must ask you not to trouble me with questions—not just yet. I may have to visit this room several times before I can tell you anything definite. On the other hand, I may never be able to tell you anything beyond what you already know. So the only thing we can do now, is to wait till I have found out all that it is possible to do."

Clayton and his friend returned to the hall, the former to write letters, the latter to read the morning papers. The nearness and the horror of the recent tragedy still hung like a load upon Clayton's heart, but he tried to think about it as little as possible, encouraging the sweet thought that the girl he loved had confessed her affection for him, and that the only obstacle to their union was now removed.

One of the many surprises in connection with the death of the millionaire was the strange will he had left behind him. This was opened by the family solicitor immediately after the funeral, and nobody was present save Lady Anna and Verna. Out of

his vast fortune Myles Rossitter only left one tenth of his money to his daughter, whilst the remainder was bequeathed unconditionally to Christopher Moreland. It was a great relief to Clayton when he heard the terms of the document, for although it made Verna a comparatively rich woman, it spared her the anxiety and responsibility of such enormous wealth as her father had possessed. For his own sake he was glad she had not inherited her parent's great fortune. It made it easier for him to continue his courtship and prove the disinterestedness of his motives. What surprised him most was that the bulk of the estate should go to a man who, as Verna had informed him, was in no way related to her family, either upon her father's or her mother's side. To add to the mystery of the affair, Clayton had that morning received a letter from Moreland, expressing his surprise at the information which had reached him, and intimating clearly that he had not the remotest expectation of deriving any benefit from the millionaire's demise.

Considerably more than an hour passed before they heard an upstair door open and shut with a bang. The noise was repeated several times, and then, after a pause, the sound of approaching foot-steps could be detected coming along the gallery, very slowly and with constant halts. Presently the figure of Greatorex was seen descending the stairs. In his hand he carried a small, black note-book and pencil, and the thoughtful expression upon his face had deepened. As the great ex-detective reached the hall, they hurriedly rose from their seats and advanced to meet him.

"I feel rather shy at repeating my former question after your answer to it," Clayton said smiling, "but I should like to know if you have discovered any clue as to how the murderer escaped from that room?"

Greatorex took off his spectacles and wiped them slowly upon his handkerchief. Then he breathed upon them and wiped them again.

"No," he replied, "I have not discovered any clue."

"Have you formed any conclusion yet?" M'Lean asked pointedly. He rather resented the man's manner to him earlier in the morning.

"No, sir. And I have not formed any conclusions."

"Has your examination of the room been of any service to you?"

"Naturally it has been of service to me. It has shown me every detail of the scene of the murder—every detail except one."

"And what is that?"

"The exit by which the murderer escaped." He turned to Clayton as he spoke. "I shall be obliged if you will let me look at all the other bedrooms in the house," he said. "Are there many?"

"Do you only refer to the bedrooms?"

"Only the bedrooms—at present."

"There are, I think, twenty-two, including the servants' apartments."

"I need not see all the servants' rooms," Greatorex said. "Are they in the same portion of the house as those occupied by yourself and Mr Moreland?"

"Yes. This is the only wing of the house which is inhabited. The other rooms are more or less lumber rooms."

"For what?"

"For storing the things which Mr Moreland brings home with him from his travels abroad. Mostly furniture, pictures, and odds and ends of bric-à-brac. He has several mantelpieces and doors, and even an old font which he found in a disused churchyard somewhere in Greece."

"Has he shown you all his collection of things?"

"No, I cannot say he has," Clayton replied, "though that is not his fault. I am afraid I am not a very enthusiastic admirer of old curiosities, and am quite ignorant about their value and merit. After going over two or three rooms with him I assure you I had had quite enough of it."

Greatorex had been entering a few notes in the book he held. He had seemingly already covered several pages before he came downstairs. He looked up as he returned it to his pocket.

"Now, if you will let me see the other bedrooms I shall be much obliged."

Much to the surprise of Clayton and M'Lean, the ex-detective did not give much attention to any of the apartments till he came to the one which Clayton occupied. His eyes wandered slowly round the room, pausing as his gaze rested upon the windows, and again when they reached the fireplace. Finally he closed the door, and took up his position just inside it, and carefully made a few more notes in his little black book. At the foot of the bed, and facing him, stood a long mirror, and, as he wrote, his eyes were raised more than once towards the framed reflection of himself. Moreland's bedroom was the last one to be visited, and here again

several notes were added to the ones already written. He only glanced casually into the servants' rooms, and with little appearance of interest.

As they were returning to the hall once more, Greatorex suddenly paused in front of a door at the end of the passage in which Moreland's apartments were situated.

"Have we been in here?" he said, looking at Clayton. "I do not think so."

"That is not a room," Clayton replied. "At least it is not a bedroom."

"What is it?"

"It leads to another of Mr Moreland's lumber rooms. You may have noticed a modern addition at the outside of the building?"

Greatorex shook his head.

"No, I have not."

"Well, this door opens into that room."

"Can you let me see it?"

"I am afraid not. It is locked, and Mr Moreland has the key."

"Have you been into it?"

"I have not actually been into it," Clayton answered, "but I have seen it through one of the windows, and it is full of all sorts of things. There is a lot of armour there."

"Ah, I should like to see the armour," Greatorex said thoughtfully. "I am a bit of a fancier that way myself. If we cannot get into the room, would it be possible for me to have a look through that window?"

"No. It is like the other window—high up in the wall."

"Then how did you manage to get a peep through it?"

Clayton laughed.

"A workman was doing something to the roof, and his ladder was against the wall. I climbed up, more out of curiosity than anything else."

"And you saw the room was full of—of what you call lumber?"

"Yes, full of it."

"Has Mr Moreland ever offered to take you into that room?"

"Yes, several times."

"Good. Well, gentlemen, I think I have finished my enquiries for to-day," Greatorex said as he put the note-book back into his pocket, and the three men continued their way back to the hall. "I am afraid I have not made any important discovery so far, but I hope you will allow me another look round to-morrow morning."

"By all means," Clayton replied. "Come whenever you like. The house—and our services—are entirely at your disposal."

"It is always a mistake to try and accomplish too much at once," Greatorex said, as M'Lean helped him on with his coat. "Thank you. Will you kindly see if the car has returned for me yet?"

As M'Lean opened the door the sound of the motor was heard approaching along the drive, and almost immediately it came into sight.

"There is one personal question I wish to ask you," the ex-detective said, addressing Clayton. "I noticed that, at the inquest, you made several allusions during your examination to a diary you

have kept, recording certain events that you allege took place in your London rooms, and also here, at The Nunnery. If that diary does not contain any private matters apart from this case, will you allow me to have a look through it?"

"I will lend it to you with pleasure," Clayton said, "but I must ask you to let me have it back again. It is the only record I have kept, and I should be sorry to lose it."

"If you will let me have it now, I will return it to-morrow when I come. I suppose it is not a very lengthy manuscript?"

"I don't know about that," Clayton answered smiling. "I should not like to have to write it again. I will fetch it now, as it may be of use to you. I have brought it up to date."

In a few minutes he returned with the diary in his hand. Greatorex opened it at once and glanced through the closely written pages before he transferred it to his pocket.

"Thank you," he said, holding out his hand. "I think I shall be able to master its contents to-night. I hope you will not be offended with me if I do not at once place implicit belief in all the statements you record in it."

"I can only repeat what I said at the inquest," Clayton said, shrugging his shoulders. "All the facts stated in that diary are absolutely correct, though I have no means of proving them to be so. You must accept them or not as you think best. Good-day. We shall expect you again to-morrow at about the same time."

"Good-day, gentlemen."

CHAPTER XXV

THE ex-detective paid a visit to The Nunnery upon each of the following three days. On the first two occasions he arrived in the morning, spending a couple of hours alone in the rooms which had already been shown to him by Clayton. On the third day he reached the house in the evening after dinner, and he was accompanied by Dr Fergusson. There was little change in his manner, though possibly it had become more reserved, and he absolutely refused to answer any questions put to him either by Clayton or M'Lean. In reply to their anxious enquiries as to the success of his investigations he always gave the same answer—"You must wait till I have found out all there is to know, and then I shall tell you everything." The expression of the mild blue eyes was absolutely non-committal, and betrayed neither disappointment nor elation. If the world-famed detective had discovered any clue to the murder, he resolutely kept it to himself. His behaviour was sometimes brusque even to rudeness, but he evidently much appreciated the assistance which was so willingly given to him by Clayton and his friend.

It was a dark, gusty night when he paid his third visit to The Nunnery, and both he and the doctor looked blue with cold as they were shown into the

hall by Madame Gastron, Emile's wife, who, with a niece of her husband's, were the only two servants in the house. Clayton and Athol M'Lean were sitting smoking beside the fire which blazed up the chimney in front of them, when they heard the sound of the approaching car. Madame Gastron was crossing the hall on her way from the dining-room when the door-bell clanged through the silent house.

"Here is our friend, come to pay us another visit," M'Lean said, as he rose from his chair. "I wish he would be a little more communicative. I suppose he is all right, but he gives no sign of having got much forrader over this wretched business."

"It is best to leave him to work out his investigations in his own way," Clayton replied, also rising. "My opinion is that if he had not got something to go upon he would have given up the job before now. I suppose men in his profession are trained to become secretive. It grows to be second nature to them."

Then the door opened, and Dr Fergusson stepped into the light from the outer darkness. He was soon followed by Greatorex. The two men were heavily covered with snow, and stamped their feet on the mat as they entered the house, more to restore their chilled circulation than to relieve themselves of the frozen moisture that fell from their shoulders.

"Well done, doctor," M'Lean exclaimed, as he shook the outstretched hand. "It is sporting of you to come out on a night like this."

Dr Fergusson smiled pleasantly at the welcome, but M'Lean noticed a strained look in his eyes as he did so. It was the look of a man who had been keeping late hours—hours given to keen study and not to dissipation—and his voice sounded grave as he returned the pressure upon his palm.

"I hope this is the first and the last time my friend will pay you so informal a call," he said. "As I have a night off from my professional duties, I thought I would accompany him. In fact he asked me to do so."

Greatorex, having handed his coat and hat to Madame Gastron, had moved to the fire, where he stood holding out his hands to the friendly blaze. Hot refreshments were speedily procured for the arrivals, but Greatorex remained faithful to his hot water. The doctor took a little brandy in his drink, and his example was followed by M'Lean and Clayton.

"I have brought Dr Fergusson with me to-night," Greatorex said, "so that I may explain to him the nature and result of my investigations. As he has already told you, there are two distinct aspects from which a case of this kind must be regarded. There is the view held by the expert police officer, to which I have devoted a good deal of my time and thought during the last few days. There is also the medical aspect, upon which I wish to consult my friend here. That is my excuse for troubling him to accompany me to-night."

"No trouble at all, I assure you," the doctor said.

"Will you have dinner?" Clayton asked, "or have you already dined?"

"Many thanks," Fergusson replied, shaking his

head. "We had our evening meal before we left Ardley, and I daresay there will be something hot waiting for us when we get home."

Clayton turned to Greatorex, who was still warming himself in front of the fire.

"Then you propose to take the doctor over the house," he said. "At least over those parts associated with the murder."

"Yes. And I must ask you to let us do so alone. There are only one or two rooms I wish to show him. Yours happens to be one of them, also Mr Moreland's. I suppose there is no objection to us visiting them?"

"Certainly not."

"Of course, we shall also want to see the apartment in which the crime was committed. Is the door open or shall we need a key?"

"You will find all those rooms available for your inspection," Clayton answered, "and if I can be of any further assistance to you, please let me know."

Clayton and his friend resumed their seats beside the fire, while Greatorex and the doctor ascended the staircase to the gloomy landing and gallery overhead. As the sound of their footsteps died away in the distance, M'Lean emptied his pipe, and carefully refilled and lit it.

"I believe that old human bloodhound has got hold of the scent at last," he said, as he puffed great clouds of smoke from his lips. "He would not have brought the doctor here at this time of night for nothing."

"I devoutly hope he has," Clayton replied seriously. "I have an idea that, if he is unable to

do anything, this crime will be handed down as one more addition to the long list of unexplained tragedies in this country. The unfortunate part of the whole business is the incredulity of everybody with regard to the actual existence of the dwarf in connection with these murders. You know, Athol, you yourself were very sceptical about the whole affair till you saw him."

"My dear fellow, I grant all that. But you must admit that your statements appeared so fantastic, and so improbable, that it was only by such an ocular demonstration that anybody could accept them as the truth. I now feel much as you must have felt before the night of the murder. I saw the little devil with my own eyes, and I swear I was not drunk at the time, yet nobody will believe my story —supported as it is by yourself. That old fool of a coroner did not pretend to hide his doubts—and of course the jury supported him."

A door overhead was gently opened, and as gently closed again. Soft as was the sound, it reached the two men downstairs with uncanny distinctness.

"I wonder how long they will be," M'Lean said. "Greatorex must know every detail of those rooms by this time."

"No doubt the doctor wishes to be informed of every theory and suggestion that has occurred to the trained mind of his friend. It was he who proposed that Greatorex should be asked to come here."

"Does Moreland know this is going on?"

"No. He does not. He was very much upset by the whole affair, and I do not want to trouble him

further in the matter till there is something definite to report."

"I suppose he has no objection to me staying on at The Nunnery," M'Lean asked. "My time has not been entirely idle for, in spite of Miss Rossitter's absence, I have been able to put in a good amount of work at her portrait. Lawrence, my boy, I do not mind telling you, but that picture is the best thing of its kind I have ever done."

"It is a wonderful likeness," Clayton said, "though I do not profess to be any sort of critic. You could not have produced a more perfect portrait. I wish I could afford to buy one like it."

"My dear fellow, I shall be delighted to give you a copy. It would be but a poor return for your kindness in getting me the commission. But with regard to Moreland. Do you think he has any objection to me prolonging my stay in his house?"

"I can assure you he has not. In the last letter I received from him, he said how glad he was that I had somebody here staying with me as, after what has occurred, he did not like to think of me being left alone, with nobody but Madame Gastron in the house. You need not worry yourself upon that score. If he wished you to leave, Moreland is not the man to hesitate in telling you so. Besides, you are doing work for him."

"I am glad to hear you say that, as the matter has been rather upon my mind lately. It is awfully decent of him, as he is giving me the run of my teeth here—and a jolly good run it is too—as well as the pleasure of your society."

"I wish it had been under more pleasant circum-

stances," Clayton said. "I wonder if he will still wish me to continue in the post of his secretary? I am afraid not."

"Why?"

"It is hardly likely he will make his home here again, after what has happened. Besides, the inheritance of such a large fortune as that which Myles Rossitter left to him, will probably alter his plans for the future."

"Very true. But the acquisition of so much wealth will be an additional reason for him to want to retain your services. He will require a secretary far more now than he has done in the past. The question in my mind is whether or not your services will be available."

"What do you mean? I do not understand you."

M'Lean shook his head knowingly, and winked across the table towards his friend.

"There is a certain young and very charming lady, who is at present living not one hundred miles from here, and she might have a word to say to that. My dear Lawrence, if you marry Miss Rossitter—as I sincerely hope you will for both your sakes—although you will not be rich beyond the dreams of avarice, it will certainly no longer be necessary for you to act as secretary to any man, however wealthy he may be. You will have other duties, and far more pleasant ones, to attend to."

Clayton flushed slightly.

"It is the greatest wish of my life to call that girl my wife," he said. "I do not care whether she comes to me as an heiress or as a pauper. I love her for what she is, and not for what she has got."

"Quite so," M'Lean replied with true Scottish shrewdness, "but it is much better that the lady of your choice should have something than nothing. I do not hold with the idea that men only marry rich girls for what they can get out of them. A nice girl is just as lovable, whether she is rich or poor. Of course, some men are always on the make in their matrimonial affairs. But, for the matter of that, so are some of the women, and I am not sure that the latter are not more conspicuous in that respect than the former."

"Well, anyhow, if I am lucky enough to marry Verna—and I know she cares for me—I shall not live an idle life at the expense of my wife's fortune," Clayton said. "The man who does that is a cad, and not worthy the love of a good woman."

"I am inclined to agree with you. But that particular class of cad is very much to the front in the matrimonial market," M'Lean muttered, "and irrespective of sex or of class."

The discussion continued for some time longer, for Clayton welcomed any subject with his friend which bore upon his affection for Verna Rossitter. The very sound of her name was a delight to him, and he knew Athol M'Lean well enough to speak his mind freely. Their conversation was, however, interrupted by the sound of subdued voices upon the landing above them, and the soft tread of footsteps descending the stairs. The clock upon the mantelpiece struck the hour of eleven.

"Here they come," M'Lean whispered, as the two figures appeared in the misty distance overhead. "I wonder if they have come to any reasonable

solution of the mystery. Two heads are supposed to be better than one, but everything depends upon what those two heads contain."

"It will be best not to ask them any questions," Clayton said. "If there is anything to know, they will tell us in their own good time."

"Right you are, but they have been a devil of a time in those rooms."

Dr Fergusson was the first to come into the hall. He carried a lighted candle in his hand, which he placed upon the table without extinguishing the flame. Clayton noticed that his face was very grave and the lines had deepened about his forehead and mouth. Greatorex looked as inscrutable as ever. The keenest observer could have gained no inkling of his thoughts by the expression upon his features, or the mild light in his blue eyes. They advanced to the centre of the great chamber, and then paused.

"I think, gentlemen, we have done all that is necessary to-night," Greatorex said, turning from Clayton to M'Lean as he spoke. "I am glad to tell you that the time I have spent here upon former occasions has not been wasted. The theories I had previously formed have been considerably strengthened and, I believe, confirmed by the valuable assistance I have received to-night from my friend, Dr Fergusson."

"I am glad to hear you say so," Clayton exclaimed. "Then it looks as if there is some chance of proving the truth of the statements made by Mr M'Lean and myself at the inquest."

The words were spoken, not as a question, but as a mere statement of fact.

"Yes," Greatorex said shortly. Then he sat down beside the table, and took a small diary from his waistcoat pocket. After turning over the leaves hurriedly, he paused and looked at Clayton. "This is Wednesday night," he said, glancing again at the little book in his hand. "I shall have to go up to London to-morrow. Will you give me a permit to look over your chambers in town?"

"Certainly," Clayton replied, and he took one of his private cards from his case, and scribbled the necessary order in pencil upon the back of it.

"Thank you," Greatorex said, as he slipped it into his pocket-book. "There is only one other matter I need trouble you about now. Is Mr Christopher Moreland in London?"

"Yes, as far as I know. I heard from him this morning, and his letter was addressed from his rooms in Acton Chambers."

"Then will you wire to him to-morrow morning, and ask him to run down here for the night? There are one or two points, in connection with this affair, which I should like to place before him. As he is the owner of this place, and the late man, Myles Rossitter, was his guest at the time of the murder, I think he ought to know them before any one else."

"I will send him a telegram the first thing in the morning," Clayton said. "At what time would you like to meet him?"

Greatorex had torn a leaf out of his pocket-book, and was busy writing upon it. As soon as he had finished, he handed the slip of paper to Clayton.

"This is the wording of the telegram I want you to send. I fear he is in a very poor state of health

just now, so it would be best not to trouble him more than is necessary. You agree with me, doctor?"

"Entirely," Fergusson replied with a slow inclination of his head. "It would be most undesirable to give him any particulars as to why his presence is wanted here."

Clayton glanced at the paper in his hand, and read the following message:

"Can you dine here this evening, and stay the night? Urgent. Wire reply."

"But why should you not send it off from Ardley in my name?" he asked. "That would save time. I do not know what his engagements are, but this ought to reach him as soon as possible."

"You are right," Greatorex replied, as he took back the paper and put it in his pocket. "I will despatch it before breakfast to-morrow morning and, when you get the reply, you must let me know what his answer is. I hope to be back at the doctor's house during the afternoon, but I may be detained in town."

When they had left The Nunnery, M'Lean turned to his friend with a sly look in his eye.

"I would bet my bottom dollar they have got something up their sleeves. But new cords would not draw it from them till they have seen Moreland, and put their case before him."

"I think they are right," Clayton said, as he lit a cigarette. "Undoubtedly, Moreland is the first person who should hear anything they may have discovered. I wonder what it is!"

Long into the small hours of the morning two

men sat side by side at a table in a dimly lighted room at Ardley, carefully comparing notes which covered many sheets of paper. Very few words passed between them, but occasionally a whispered exclamation rose from the lips of one of them, as he underlined certain words with a red pencil.

"I think our evidence is conclusive, doctor."

"Yes, I think so."

"Can you detect any flaw in it?"

"Not one."

Greatorex rose from his chair and stretched himself with a slow yawn.

"The next act in the drama will begin when I return from London to-morrow afternoon," he said grimly.

"Yes."

"And the final curtain will fall—to-morrow night."

"I believe so." Dr Fergusson looked sternly up at the man who faced him. "It will be a ghastly sequel to a terrible crime."

"Yes. But you are a remarkable man, doctor, to have discovered the central idea of the whole plot."

"It would have been valueless without your help," Fergusson said. "I only evolved a theory. You reduced that theory to what is possible and crystallized it into a fact."

CHAPTER XXVI

CLAYTON and M'Lean were finishing breakfast upon the following morning when the door opened, and the small maid entered the dining-room bringing a telegram upon a tray. She handed it to Clayton.

"Is there any answer?" he asked, as he tore open the orange envelope.

"I do not know, sir," she replied nervously, "but the boy is still waiting outside."

Clayton read the message hurriedly, and then tossed the paper over to his companion. It was brief, but to the point.

"Will reach you, nine o'clock to-night. Impossible sooner.—MORELAND."

While M'Lean was reading it, Clayton fetched a sheet of paper from the writing-table and quickly wrote the following words, which he addressed to "Greatorex, care of Dr Fergusson, Ardley."

"Will be here nine o'clock to-night.—CLAYTON."

"Give that to the boy, and tell him to take it to Dr Fergusson's as soon as he gets back to Ardley. Here are some coppers for his trouble."

"Thank you, sir."

The girl left the room, and the two men were left alone again. There was a long silence between them, which was broken by M'Lean.

"I hope we shall be present when Greatorex

unfolds his theories and conclusions," he said. "I think we have some claim to be among the first to hear his news—if he has any. What do you think?"

"I quite agree with you, for there is no doubt he has some very important information indeed," Clayton answered, as he tore up the telegram and threw the pieces into the fire. "He would not have asked me to send that wire if Moreland's presence had not been necessary here. But what are you going to do to-day? It will be a long time before nine o'clock comes, and the more we speculate upon what may happen to-night the slower the hours will pass. Will you motor me over to Tunbridge Wells again?"

"There is nothing I should like better. We cannot stop indoors and mope about the house all day." M'Lean walked to the window as he spoke and looked out. "I should not be surprised if we had more snow. The clouds are heavy and the glass is falling."

"Then we will go and lunch with Lady Anna and Verna. They are starting for London this afternoon, and I promised to look them up again before they leave Tunbridge Wells. Besides, they will be anxious to hear our news."

"I will drive you in with pleasure," M'Lean said, "but I think I had better lunch elsewhere. They will not want me there, and you know that two are company—three are not."

"My dear Athol. That is all nonsense. You are a great favourite with both the ladies, and Lady Anna has told me more than once that she hoped

I would bring you with me the next time I called." He laughed, and then added, "Besides, if three are not company—four are."

"Ah! Now I see what you are after," M'Lean said, joining in the laugh. "You want to palm her ladyship off on to me and have Miss Rossitter to yourself. That is your game, is it? Well, I hope you will do the same for me one of these days."

"Indeed I will. It only rests with you to give me the opportunity."

Lady Anna and Verna took their meals in a private sitting-room, and they gave a cordial welcome to their guests. The girl was still very much broken in health and spirits, and Clayton was surprised to notice an expression upon her face which he had rarely seen there before, and that was only during the few occasions when they had discussed the existence of the dwarf Harris together. He took an early opportunity of mentioning the fact to Lady Anna as they stood alone beside the window, waiting for lunch to be served.

"It will be a good thing for Miss Rossitter when she gets away from this place and everything that can remind her of what has happened," he said. "Do you not think she is looking very ill, as though she were brooding too much over the past? She does not seem as well this morning as when I saw her last."

Lady Anna shook her head in a very determined manner, and an expression of annoyance came to her face.

"I can easily explain the reason for that," she replied in a low voice. "Verna had a visitor this

morning, and I fear their conversation has rather upset her. I did my best to persuade her not to see him, but it was no good. This is the result of it."

"A visitor!" Clayton exclaimed in surprise. At once the thought occurred to him that Christopher Moreland had been to the hotel in order to further his suit. He bit his lip in silence for a few moments, and glanced at the girl who was talking to M'Lean at the other end of the room. "May I ask who the visitor was?"

"He was a man called Greatorex, and I understand he is a detective who is interesting himself—with your consent—in the mystery of her father's death."

"Do you know the subject of their conversation?"

"I was not present at the interview," Lady Anna replied, "but Verna tells me he called to obtain any information she could give him with regard to her parent's acquaintance with Christopher. Of course, she could tell him very little, as their connection was only a business one."

Clayton gave a sigh of relief.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"All!" Lady Anna repeated, as a waiter entered the room, bringing the first instalment of lunch. "I think it is quite enough. I have been doing my best to distract her thoughts from the tragedy ever since we came here, and now this man turns up, and keeps her for nearly an hour talking about it. It is really most vexatious."

It was still early in the afternoon when Lady Anna's maid came to inform her mistress that the

hotel omnibus would be at the door in ten minutes' time, and her ladyship hurried off to see that all the preparations for their departure were complete. Verna's travelling things were lying ready on the sofa, and she began to put on her hat in front of the glass above the mantelpiece. It was exactly at that moment M'Lean suddenly remembered that he had a most important letter to write, and he hastened from the room with most suspicious haste.

"Verna. You have seen Greatorex this morning," Clayton said, as soon as they were alone together.

She started violently, and turned towards him. The troubled look upon her face had become accentuated, and her hands trembled as she tied the knot of her veil.

"Yes. I saw him this morning."

"Will you let me know what he said—and what you told him?"

"No, I cannot do that. I promised him our conversation should be kept private," she answered uneasily, "but only on the condition that he tells you everything himself. He assured me he would do so upon the earliest opportunity."

"Did he mention the dwarf?"

"Hush!" she gasped, and her pale face became suddenly distorted with terror. "Do not ask me any questions. You will hear everything there is to know from Mr Greatorex. I—I cannot talk about it to you. It is horrible."

Clayton walked to the window, and stared moodily out across the common that stretched in front of him. When he returned to the girl's side, the worried expression had left his face.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked.

"I do not know," she replied wistfully. "We start for Italy at the end of the month, and it is not settled how soon we shall be back in England."

"But, dear, I must see you again before you go. There are any amount of things I want to talk over with you."

"Can you not come up to London before we leave?"

Clayton hesitated.

"That all depends upon what happens during the next few days," he replied. "My place is at The Nunnery—at any rate for the present. But I will ask Moreland when I see him this evening. There is no reason why I should not put in a week in London, and I hate the idea of you going away for any length of time without seeing you again—if only to say good-bye and to wish you God-speed."

Then the door opened and Lady Anna bustled in, followed by her maid. Behind them stood the massive form of Athol M'Lean, who had evidently finished his letter in record time. He had already arranged to motor the two ladies down to the station, leaving the maid to take the luggage in the hotel omnibus.

On their return to The Nunnery, Clayton found that a letter had arrived for him by the afternoon post. He so rarely received letters of any kind, except from Moreland, that he looked at it with some curiosity before he opened it. The name and address were in a handwriting which he did not know. M'Lean was glancing through the evening paper, when he heard a startled exclamation

from his friend, who was standing beside the lighted lamp, reading the communication in his hand.

"Not another mystery, I hope," Athol said. "I do not ask for your confidence but, my dear fellow, do tell me if it is good news or bad?"

Clayton handed him the letter, and he looked at once at the signature. It was from Lord Orsett, and was worded as follows :

"DEAR CLAYTON,

"I do not know what your arrangements are with regard to my cousin, Christopher Moreland, but I should think it is rather a poor sort of job.

"My secretary has recently resigned his post with me, owing to family matters which concern neither of us. I am, therefore, writing to ask if you would care to take his place? If so, please let me know your decision during the next few days, as my sister is taking Miss Rossitter and myself off to some God-forsaken place abroad shortly, and I should want you to come with me. I hope you will see your way to accept my offer, and we can arrange details later on.

"What a ghastly affair that was at The Nunnery! I am sure you would be glad to get away from the place and its associations.

"The ladies join me here, in town, this afternoon, and we remain at the above address till the end of the month.

"Yours sincerely,

"ORSETT."

M'Lean handed it back to Clayton.

"By Jove, you are in luck," he said. "Of course, you will accept."

"Rather. It seems too good to be true. I do not think Moreland will raise any objection, for—after all—they are cousins, and he can find plenty of men to do my work here better than I can. I suppose Lady Anna did not know anything about this when we saw her to-day, or she would have mentioned it."

"I expect she knew a good deal more than you think," M'Lean said, "and you probably have to thank her for the offer as much as his lordship. Lady Anna is no fool, and she sees pretty clearly what the position is between Miss Rossitter and yourself."

They sat talking over the new situation which had arisen till the dressing bell sounded somewhere at the back of the building, and then hurried upstairs to their rooms. The old hereditary love for social forms and etiquette was a strong characteristic of Moreland's, and it was always understood that they were obeyed, even when he and Clayton were alone together.

The clock upon Clayton's table was striking the hour, and he had just finished his preparations, when he heard the sound of a motor coming along the drive, and stop outside the front door. Christopher Moreland was a punctual man in all his engagements, and was never too late or too early, unless there was some definite reason for being so. But more than half-an-hour passed before he joined his two guests in the hall downstairs.

He looked pale and worried, and Clayton noticed a restless expression in his eyes which he had not seen there before. His health had not improved during his sojourn in London, and he moved slowly with the help of his two sticks.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting," he said, as he shook hands with the two men who came forward to meet him. "My servant seems to have missed the train at Victoria, and I had to come down alone." He smiled in a strained way as he spoke. "That may appear a small matter to you, but it means a great deal to me. I have been obliged to do my own unpacking, and, in my present state of health, the exertion is a painful and a tedious one."

"I wish you had let me know," Clayton said. "Of course I should have come at once, and done it for you."

"Thank you. I am sure you would. I did not think of it, or I should have taken advantage of your help. Now then—shall we go in to dinner?"

Never before had the great dining-room appeared to Clayton so spacious and so gloomy. The tall silver candlesticks upon the table threw a bright light upon the spotless cloth, and the silver, and the glass, but—beyond that—the darkness was impenetrable. Even the fire that smouldered in the wide grate seemed to be trying to pierce the mist like an evil blood-shot eye, watching the men as they silently took their seats. An uncanny shiver passed down Clayton's spine as he drew his chair beneath him. He remembered that the same sensation had affected him before, and it had always been associated with the coming of the dwarf. A

sudden, indescribable feeling of fear took possession of him, and he glanced furtively round the room. He could see nothing, except the table at which he sat and his two companions, but he instinctively knew that the evil presence of Harris was not far from him, that his baneful influence was making itself felt in some psychic manner which he could not understand. A quick look at M'Lean, who sat in front of him, did much to restore his self-composure. The artist was in no way troubled with any such sensation, and was enjoying his dinner with all the appreciation of a healthy appetite. Of course, the absence of the faithful Emile accounted for a good deal. There were no lights upon the sideboard. The standard lamps in the distant corners were unlit. There were only Madame Gastron and her niece to attend to them, which was a strange contrast to the silent, deaf footmen who had flitted ghostlike behind their chairs upon former occasions. Although Moreland rarely touched wine or spirits himself, he was a generous host to his guests, and he had ordered more than one bottle of champagne to be opened. Clayton sipped the amber liquid in his glass with a relish it had never given him before. It warmed his blood, and cleared his brain, and it set the nerves tingling all through his body.

The uncanny feeling grew faint within him, and finally passed off.

As soon as the soup had been taken away, and a couple of pheasants placed before Moreland, which he carved with great difficulty, refusing Clayton's offer of help, their host asked the question which had been expected by both his guests since the

moment when they had met him in the hall after his arrival. He turned to his secretary with a look of enquiry :

"Your telegram was worded 'Urgent' or I should not have undertaken the journey down here to-night. Is it a private matter which you want to see me about?"

His gaze was directed at M'Lean as he asked the question, but the artist was so busy enjoying his dinner that he did not see the look.

"It is not a matter which need be kept private from our friend here," Clayton said, and he dropped his voice to a whisper. "It is in connection with the—the murder of Myles Rossitter."

Christopher Moreland shifted his position in his chair, and slowly sipped the tumbler of soda-water beside him.

"Has any clue been discovered that will explain the crime?" he asked anxiously. "If so, I should like to know it at once."

"That is exactly what I cannot tell you."

"What do you mean?"

"The message I sent you was not from myself. It was from another man."

Moreland raised his eyebrows slightly, and fingered a silver fork beside his plate.

"Another man! Who is he?"

"He is the doctor who attended the inquest," Clayton replied. "He was the one who came with the police as—as soon as the murder was discovered."

"I do not remember his name."

"His name is Fergusson. Dr Fergusson of Ardley."

"But why did he send such a message to me, and through a third person? My address in London is not a secret one."

"He wishes to submit to you certain evidence which has been obtained with regard to the crime by his friend, Mr Greatorex."

"And who is Greatorex?"

"He is an ex-detective, who was formerly employed at Scotland Yard."

"What has he found out?"

"That I do not yet know."

"Where has he been making his enquiries?"

"In this house."

"In this house! But what right had this man, Greatorex—or Fergusson for that matter—to carry on investigations here without my leave?"

"The evidence given at the inquest was so unsatisfactory, that Dr Fergusson thought it would be a good thing to get a capable detective to try and sift the facts, and form an impartial opinion. Everybody connected with the crime—including yourself—would naturally be anxious for the truth to be known, if possible. After the verdict, there was no alternative way of doing this, except by private enquiry."

"In my house, and without my permission! Why was I not told of this?"

"Because the doctor thought it would give you less worry and anxiety if these investigations were carried on privately. As soon as anything definite was known you were, of course, to be the first to hear of it. It is for that reason that I sent you the telegram."

"Then something definite has been discovered?"

"I conclude so, because I was asked to wire to you, asking for your attendance here to-night."

"Is he coming to see me—here—to-night?"

For the first time since Clayton had met Moreland he saw an ugly glint of anger flash through his eyes. It lasted only a moment, but it left an uncomfortable impression upon Clayton's mind.

"I expect him here every moment."

"And the man—Greatorex."

"He will probably accompany the doctor," Clayton replied. "It is to his work and efforts that you owe whatever information he is going to put before you."

"As I did not authorise any such enquiries to be made here, I consider the behaviour of these men a most presumptuous and uncalled for piece of impertinence, and I refuse to see them." Moreland leaned across the table as he spoke. "I also think you have considerably abused the confidence I placed in you, Mr Clayton, by allowing such a thing to take place."

Clayton flushed at the words.

"I assure you that your welfare was our first consideration."

"I do not want to be assured of anything of the kind," Moreland replied coldly. "I shall be obliged if you will consider your engagement with me terminates to-morrow morning. The car will be at the door to take you and your friend to the station in time to catch the mid-day train to London."

"But—"

Clayton did not finish the sentence, for at that moment a man stepped forward out of the surrounding darkness and advanced to the table. Moreland did not see him, for he came from behind his chair. But both M'Lean and his friend started suddenly from their seats and stared wide-eyed at the stranger. Neither of them had seen him before. He advanced to Moreland's side and placed a hand upon his arm.

"Christopher Moreland," he said, "in the King's name, I arrest you for the wilful murder, in this house, of the man—*Myles Rossitter*."

CHAPTER XXVII

MORELAND turned hastily round in his chair and looked up at the man who stood over him.

“What is the meaning of this?” he said furiously. “Who are you, and what the devil are you doing here at this time of night?”

The stranger glanced behind him and gave a beckoning sign. As he did so, two men came forward from a distant dim corner and silently took up their positions, one upon each side of Moreland’s chair.

“The reason for my visit is twofold,” the stranger said. “In the first place I hold a warrant to arrest you on the charge of murdering Myles Rossitter in this house during the early hours of the first day of this month. In the second place, I have written authority from Scotland Yard to search every room in this building.”

Moreland had turned very pale as he listened to the words, but the anger still glinted in swift, bright flashes from his eyes. For a few moments he did not speak. Then he turned swiftly towards Clayton.

“Is this any of your work?” he asked with a thinly veiled sneer. “If it is meant as a practical joke, it is singularly ill-timed and out of place.”

Clayton’s eyes were fixed upon the men who had

suddenly appeared out of the darkness and grouped themselves behind Moreland, and his throat became dry as he noticed the stern expressions upon their faces.

"I swear I know nothing about this outrage," he replied huskily. "I have no more idea who these fellows are than you have, nor what is their business."

"This is no practical joke," said the man who appeared to be in authority, as he drew a couple of official looking papers from his pocket. "Here is my warrant for your arrest. Here also are my instructions to search this house. I do not know anything about these other two gentlemen. My business is with *you*, Mr Moreland—and with you alone."

"This is a most infernal piece of insolence, which I shall make you pay dearly for," Moreland said as he moved his chair a few inches backward and glared up at the person who addressed him. "What is your name?"

"I am Superintendent Mills—of Scotland Yard," the man replied. "Here is my card." He placed it upon the table as he spoke. "I must warn you that anything you now say will, or may, be used in evidence against you later on."

Moreland leaned back with a growl like an angry animal.

"Damn you," he said, "if you do not instantly leave this house I will have you thrown out. I —"

"You will do nothing of the sort," the Superintendent said sternly. "I have got enough men with me here to-night to make your arrest an easy

matter in spite of any resistance. It will be best if you will quietly consent to let me take possession of the house. You cannot escape, and I do not wish to make things more unpleasant for you than is necessary."

Moreland started to rise from his chair, but the men standing on either side of him moved a step nearer to where he sat.

"But you do not seem to realize that your behaviour is an insult which I do not intend to submit to quietly. I no more murdered Myles Rossitter than you did. Why, he was a personal friend of mine and a guest in my house." He lifted his eyes as he spoke. "My God, you will suffer for this!"

In the meantime Clayton had to some extent recovered his self-control. He advanced quickly to the Superintendent's side and faced him.

"You have made a terrible mistake," he said. "Mr Moreland is as innocent of that crime as I am. I saw the assassin enter the room where the murder was committed, and I heard the shot fired. So also did that gentleman, who was with me at the time." He pointed to M'Lean.

"That is quite right," the artist said, and he looked very much as if he was going to make for the Superintendent and throw him out of the room. "We both saw the murderer, and we are prepared to swear in any Court of Law that he was not Mr Moreland. I tell you, you are making a damned fool of yourself, and the sooner you get out of the house the better. You are upon the wrong track altogether this time. The man you want is an infernal little dwarf, who goes by the name of

Harris. When you have caught him you will have got the right man, and I will be among the first to give evidence against him."

Moreland was sitting thoughtfully tapping his fingers upon the table. A deep red spot had come to each of his cheeks, and he was staring straight in front of him. The Superintendent placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"Now, Mr Moreland," he said, "if you have finished your dinner I must ask you to come into another room where I can speak to you privately."

"Do you really mean this?"

"I do. And under the circumstances I must instruct my men to search you."

Moreland started.

"Searched! What for?"

"I have got my orders," the Superintendent replied, "and my business is to obey them. You must be searched in case you carry firearms upon your person. Please stand up."

"And if I refuse?"

The officer lifted his shoulders with a deprecating gesture.

"The inference would be obvious," he answered, "and the consequences most unpleasant for yourself."

Christopher Moreland rose painfully to his feet, and there was an ugly look upon his face as he did so.

"Unfortunately I am not in a position to refuse," he said, "but the time will come when you will be sorry for this behaviour."

"Shall we chuck these blighters out?" M'Lean

shouted furiously. "I think Lawrence and I can tackle them between us."

"I do not know who you are, sir," the Superintendent said, "but it would be best for you not to mix yourself up in this matter. Any force you may attempt to use would be worthless, as I have ample assistance here to carry out my instructions in spite of any opposition you may offer."

While he was speaking, the two constables had been passing their hands in and out of Moreland's pockets, and feeling the length of his body, to discover any hidden weapon that might be concealed there. As soon as they had finished their examination, they looked towards their chief, and shook their heads.

"Right," the Superintendent said, addressing Moreland. "If you will show the way, sir, we will now retire to another room."

It was evident there were other unseen occupants of the apartment besides those who were visible, for, as Moreland advanced towards the door, it opened slowly, and the strange procession passed out into the dim light of the hall. Clayton counted five figures, besides those of his host and Superintendent Mills. As the door closed behind them, he turned to M'Lean with a low whistle.

"They will have the devil to pay for this," he said. "What do you think is their game?"

M'Lean poured himself out another glass of port, and sipped it in silence for a few moments. Then he resumed his seat.

"I think both Fergusson and Greatorex have

made a terrible blunder," he replied. "I cannot understand what they are up to. They know as well as you and I do, that Moreland did not kill Myles Rossitter."

"Of course they do. Besides, we both saw who it was who did commit the crime."

"There is no doubt about that."

"It was the dwarf—Harris."

"Yes. It was the dwarf. Although we did not actually see the murder performed, we know there was only one person who could have done it—and that person was undoubtedly Harris. Why, we saw him enter the room, and we heard the shot fired. Nobody entered or left that room afterwards, except ourselves. There is a ghastly mistake somewhere, and I fear our little friend Greatorex is at the bottom of it. He has worked very hard, but he has come to the wrong conclusion this time."

Clayton was walking slowly up and down the room, deep in thought. Both the men heard the sounds of distant voices, and the tread of feet upstairs and in the hall. M'Lean had lit his pipe, and was staring at the darkness above him. They did not speak much. Each of them was conscious of some impending disaster, and was waiting expectant—not knowing for what.

Nearly an hour passed in this way, and M'Lean had almost emptied the well-filled decanter of port beside him, when the silence of the house was suddenly broken by a shrill, long-drawn cry, which chilled the marrow in their bones. It was the sound of a man's voice, in hellish fury but not in pain. As he heard it, the same uncanny feeling returned to

Clayton, and he shivered, though the room was warm. He paused in his walk, and looked towards his friend.

“What does that mean?”

“Don’t ask me,” M’Lean replied nervously. “I am beginning to think I do not know what anything means in this infernal house.”

Again the long shriek echoed through the silence. It sounded like the cry of some creature, half human, half animal. It was the voice of passion—lust—fury—despair.

Both the men in the dining-room hastened towards the door, as though moved by a common impulse. Clayton glanced backward as he did so, at the picture of the white covered table, with its wealth of silver and glass, and hot-house flowers and fruit. Beyond it the misty darkness, veined with blue clouds of cigarette smoke. Above it the great gloom of massive rafters, dimly seen in the hazy space.

As they reached the door, it opened suddenly, and a figure appeared upon the threshold. The light was behind it, glimmering faint from the hall, and they could not see the face. As soon as he spoke, however, they recognized the voice of Dr Fergusson.

“Come,” he said, in a low, hushed voice. “You are wanted in the library.”

Clayton laid a hand upon his arm, and drew him forward.

“Fergusson!” he gasped. “For God’s sake tell us what all this means. The whole thing is absurd, a ridiculous mistake. Moreland is as innocent of that crime as I am.”

The doctor disengaged himself gently but without a word, and led the way across the hall to the door of the library which was open. On either side of it stood a man in dark relief against the deeper gloom of the oak panelling behind him.

Clayton followed his leader like a man in a dream. He did not raise his eyes till he had entered the room. There was a horrible silence about him. Only his own steps made sound upon the bare boards he trod. A dull numbness had come to his brain, though his senses of touch and of sight had grown keenly alert. He felt the body of M'Lean pressing close behind him. He could feel the hot breath from his nostrils upon his neck.

Then he looked up—slowly—fearfully—at the scene in front of him. Each detail of it left a lasting impression upon his memory which remains till this day. As he realized the gruesome significance of what he saw there, he gave a low moan of horror, and staggered forward.

Facing him upon the sofa was the distorted shape of a human figure, and the Superintendent was holding a lamp over it. Behind him stood three tall men, and Greatorex was bending over the cushion upon which the head of the person rested.

"Oh, my God!" Clayton panted. "This is terrible. I—I do not understand it! No—I cannot believe it!"

It was the Superintendent's voice which broke the silence that followed his words. He placed the lamp upon a table behind him, and looked straight at Clayton.

"This is the man who murdered Myles Rossitter,"

he said. "You say you can deny it. Look at him now."

Clayton's eyes were fixed with a growing horror upon the form coiled up in front of him. He reeled across the room, and leaned over the upturned face.

The shape he saw was that of the dwarf, Harris—but the features were the features of Christopher Moreland.

He sank back upon a chair which was quickly moved towards him, and hid his face in his hands. The sight of it, and all it meant to him, was more than he could bear.

Then a soft musical voice broke the silence. It came from the figure upon the sofa, and the sound of it sent a thrill through every man in the room.

"You devils!" it said, as the ungainly mass of flesh moved uneasily where it lay. "You have got the truth out of me—*by force*. Damn you. But you think I am in your power." A weird laugh followed the words. "I am not. You think I shall swing for the murder I have committed, but you are mistaken. You have proved my guilt, but I have saved my neck, for I am now—*Ah!*!" The figure squirmed upon the sofa, and the great hands went convulsively to his throat. "I am going to show you how—how—"

Then a ghastly scene followed. The body began to wriggle and shake itself, while low moans went up from the distorted lips. The bulk of the dwarf's shape appeared to be gradually contracting, while the victim was suffering excruciating agony. The men who stood around remained motionless. Each one of them knew that he could do nothing. Even

Dr Fergusson turned aside, averting his eyes from the hideous sight.

"Kill me! For mercy's sake, kill me!" the dwarf shrieked, as he moved among the cushions. "I emptied the tabloids into my mouth, and swallowed them. Oh God! Kill me! Kill me!"

The figure rose and fell in shocking convulsions. Then it rolled to the ground, writhing with a dreadful gurgling at the throat. For a moment, the contracted muscles twitched. Then it lay still—a deformed, lifeless mass upon the carpet.

Dr Fergusson was already stooping over the body, feeling both the pulse and the heart.

"It is a terrible end," he said, as he straightened himself, and glanced round him, "but God is more merciful to him than man would have been, had he gone before a human judge and jury."

"Is he dead?" Greatorex asked in a low voice.

"Yes. He is dead."

M'Lean stepped quickly to the chair where Clayton sat. He appeared to be in a dazed condition, and hardly conscious.

"Come, old pal," he said, as he helped him to rise from his seat. "There is nothing more we can do here, and I am going to take you to your room. We shall hear all we want to know to-morrow."

Athol M'Lean is still haunted by the scene he then left behind him. Dark figures, standing in the half-light, and—upon the ground—the lifeless body of the dwarf—*Christopher Moreland*.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FIVE men sat round the table in the dining-room of The Nunnery, and in front of them were spread many papers. The expressions upon their faces were grave and serious. They were Superintendent Mills, Greatorex, and Dr Fergusson. The other two men, Clayton and M'Lean, sat with anxious looks of enquiry upon their features, and both of them appeared nervous and ill at ease. The ex-detective sat at the head of the table, and upon either side of him sat the Superintendent and the doctor. Clayton and M'Lean were opposite to each other. It was late in the morning of the day following the events recorded in the last chapter.

Greatorex, whose hands had been busy among the papers and note-books beside him, gave a low sigh of satisfaction as he drew from among them a small packet of manuscript, and loosened the pink tape which held the sheets together. Then he glanced thoughtfully upwards, and the direction of his gaze alternated between the faces of the two men furthest from him.

"I have asked you to meet me here, gentlemen, in order that I may place before you as soon as possible the facts which culminated in the terrible event we witnessed in this house last night," he said, in a slow, even voice. "The evidence which I am

now going to submit to you will, of course, be repeated at the inquest of the unfortunate man who has taken his own life. I feel, however, it is my duty to let you know, without delay, the result of my investigations and enquiries—here and elsewhere—which directly led up to that tragedy, which is really a sequel to the former crime—the murder of Myles Rossitter."

He paused, and slightly altered the position of some of the papers in front of him. He was still directing his remarks exclusively to Clayton and to Athol M'Lean. The doctor and Superintendent Mills were leaning back in their chairs, and their countenances in no way betrayed the fact that they knew what was going to be said.

"It is a long story—and a strange story," Greatorex continued. "I believe it to be one of the most remarkable episodes in all the annals of crime. Had it not been for the valuable assistance I have received from my friend, Doctor Fergusson, I doubt whether the identity of Myles Rossitter's murderer would ever have been established. Now, gentlemen, I have before me three important documents dealing with this case, each of which is dependent upon the others in forging the links of evidence to prove indisputably that the man who murdered Myles Rossitter was—*Christopher Moreland*."

Clayton leaned hurriedly across the table.

"No—no," he said quickly. "That is impossible. The assassin was the dwarf—Harris."

Greatorex raised a reproving hand for silence, and his forehead contracted into a slight frown.

"I must ask you not to interrupt me, except to answer my questions," he said. "I have a very difficult and strange problem to unravel, and it is necessary that you should listen attentively to what I tell you, following each step I take in explaining this remarkable story with most careful reasoning. Now, the most important of these three documents is the diary of recent events which occurred both in London and here." He looked at Clayton as he spoke. "The other two statements deal with my own investigations of the case and a medical theory or opinion upon the matter, written by Dr Fergusson. These three documents, taken conjointly and in the light of what has subsequently happened, prove conclusively the all-important fact that Christopher Moreland and the dwarf Harris were one and the same person." He paused and pointed a finger towards Clayton, who was watching him intently and eagerly listening to every word. "You had ocular demonstration of the fact last night."

"There is no possible doubt about it," the Superintendent said quietly. "The body upstairs is surely evidence enough."

"Before I begin the history of this weird dual personality, there are three facts which I wish to recall to your memory, Mr Clayton," Greatorex said. "They have an important bearing upon all the other details of this mystery. In the first place, you never saw the dwarf in daylight. It was always at night when you met him, both in London and here. Am I correct?"

"Yes," Clayton replied, "you are quite right."

"Secondly. The flats respectively occupied by Moreland and Harris were facing each other upon the same landing, and therefore within easy access of each other?"

"Yes. That is so."

"Thirdly. The condition of Christopher Moreland's health was apparently bad, and he was often so infirm that he was obliged to use sticks to assist him in his movements. He was also always physically weaker than usual after those occasions when you had seen and met the dwarf Harris."

Clayton remained silent for some moments. Then he nodded his head. "Moreland always struck me as a man in delicate health, but—yes—now you mention it, I do remember that his condition appeared much worse when I saw him after meeting the dwarf."

Greatorex drew himself up in his chair, and lightly tapped an open letter upon the table with a pencil in his hand.

"I confess," he said, "that after I had concluded my investigations here there were several points which baffled me, even after consulting the doctor." He held the letter up in his hand, and then replaced it in front of him. "I have, however, this morning received a communication which fully explains all the matters which were the only missing links in my chain of evidence. Mr Clayton, will you allow me to ring the bell for your servant, Madame Gastron?"

Clayton nodded, and M'Lean, who was nearest to the fireplace, at once went and pulled the cord upon the wall.

There was silence for a few moments. Then the door opened and the housekeeper's niece entered the room.

"Where is Madame Gastron?" Greatorex asked sternly.

The girl looked nervously from her questioner to Clayton, and fingered the corner of her apron.

"Ask her to come here," Clayton said. "Mr Greatorex wishes to see her."

The girl hesitated.

"Madame Gastron left the house early this morning," she said, with an anxious look at the men who were seated round the table.

"Left!" Clayton exclaimed. "Where has she gone, and why did she leave?"

Greatorex tapped his pencil upon the table, and glanced significantly at the Superintendent.

"Let me know when she returns," he said. "Is there any other servant in the house besides yourself?"

"No, sir."

"Thank you. Then you may go."

They waited till the door closed behind the girl and the sound of her retreating footsteps had died away in the distance. Then Greatorex broke the tense silence, addressing himself to Clayton.

"Your worthy housekeeper will not return," he said, "at any rate to The Nunnery. She is now on her way to join her husband in Amsterdam, though I much doubt if she will leave this country. Had I received this letter earlier in the day, I might have been able to intercept her departure, but Superintendent Mills has already sent a telegram to

Scotland Yard, and by mid-day the police at every port in the country will be on the alert to arrest both Emile Gastron and his wife. I did not question that girl just now. If she is ignorant of the woman's movements I should only have excited her suspicions. If she is aware of her aunt's present actions—which I doubt—she would have lied to me. Any chance of her escape from this house would now be impossible, for the police are already in possession of the place."

Then Greatorex rose from his seat, with a rapid glance at the papers strewn before him. He seemed to be more at his ease as he stood there, than he had been in the deep oak chair in which he sat. He cleared his voice, and again took up the letter to which he had already referred.

"This communication, gentlemen, is from the man Emile Gastron," he said, "and I propose to deal with it first, as it explains the original motives and, reasons that brought about those tragedies in which we are interested. It must be fully understood before we come to more recent events. I must again ask you to follow me very carefully, judging the information I am now going to place before you in connection with what has happened recently."

Superintendent Mills had moved his chair a few inches nearer the speaker, and sat forward with his head resting upon his hands, and his elbows upon the table. Dr Fergusson leaned back in his seat, and his hands were clasped tight in front of him. His face was like a mask, but he was watching Greatorex with an eager, professional look. Both Clayton and M'Lean were straining across the table, with every

nerve tight strung, every sense at high pressure, and their gaze was fixed intently upon the mild blue eyes of the great detective.

‘ Some years ago, when the diamond mines were first being discovered in South Africa, three men were travelling in a then unknown district of that country,’ Greatorex began slowly. “ They had met each other by chance, and continued their journey together, more for the sake of companionship than because they had any interests in common. They all belonged to the class which, in those days, was too often represented in our British Dominions beyond the sea. They had left this country for various reasons, none of which were creditable to our notions of honesty and morality. Their names were—Christopher Moreland, Myles Rossitter, and William Thorndyke. The first-named of these men was, as you know, of good family, being as a matter of fact, a near relative of the Earl of Orsett. Rossitter was a mere adventurer, with small means and unscrupulous conscience. I have not been able to trace his parentage, but he appears to have had a fairly good education, and went out to South Africa to pick up any job which would put money in his pocket. His wife was dead, and he had only one child, whom he left behind him in England. That child was Miss Verna Rossitter.”

Clayton’s lips twitched as the name was spoken, and the lines upon his face became more set as he listened to the story which was being unravelled before him.

“ The third man was what I suppose in those days was called a ‘ squatter.’ He had a certain amount

of land and money, and went in for farming upon a small scale. He was a man of weak character, and with two all-compelling vices—drink and gambling. Fortunately for him, he was rarely in a position to indulge either of them, but, when the opportunity did present itself, he was willing to barter away his soul for a bottle of brandy, a toss with the dice, or a hand with cards. So you will readily understand that these three haphazard companions were about as unprincipled a trio as could be met with in a long day's journey.

“Well, to cut a long story short, they found themselves one night in a small wayside hotel, far off the beaten track, and, by that time both Moreland and Rossitter, though probably distrusting each other, knew that they had found a lamb to fleece between them. Cards and dice were produced, also a bottle of fiery South African spirits, and the devil himself must have been one of the party, for, before they rose from the table, Thorndyke was mad drunk, and had gambled away everything he possessed. That hotel was run by a Frenchman and his wife, whose name was *Gastron*.”

Greatorex paused to moisten his lips with his tongue. Clayton went to the sideboard, and returned with a decanter and glasses which he placed upon the table.

“The three men continued their journey together, though Thorndyke was in a state of collapse bordering upon delirium tremens, and eventually reached the property which now belonged in equal shares to Christopher Moreland and Myles Rossitter. It was a poor place, with a dreary wooden hut in the centre

of what looked like useless pasture for sheep or cattle. Part of it was veldt, part of it was bordered by rocky mountains, and a narrow river trickled through the centre which, at times, was only a succession of pools. They remained there a month, but before the first two weeks were over, Rossitter had found out that the dreary hut was worth more than its weight in gold. He had discovered *diamonds*."

"Diamonds!"

It was Clayton who spoke the word, with a quick indrawing of his breath. The word recalled to his memory his experience of finding the glittering necklace in the cab upon the night when he first met the dwarf, the exchange of the real stones for artificial ones, his subsequent interview with Myles Rossitter, the eager interest shown by Harris with regard to their disappearance, and his insistence that they had been stolen from the body of the murdered man, whom he had found in his London chambers.

"What happened after that discovery can be easier imagined than described," Greatorex continued. "Undoubtedly Myles Rossitter held the trump card which commanded the situation. He had already spent some years prospecting for ore and precious stones in many countries, and he alone knew the value of the property which had come into the possession of himself and Christopher Moreland. He therefore struck a bargain with his partner. In exchange for his professional knowledge, it was arranged that he should pocket two-thirds of the wealth derived from the diamonds found on the estate, while his partner should receive the remaining one-third of the profits. This arrangement was

mutually convenient to both the men, for, while it made Moreland a man of considerable wealth, it raised Rossitter to the position of a millionaire.

"After working the mine for a year, upon a minimum of capital and labour, it occurred to Rossitter that it would be a good thing to form a company, with himself as chairman, while Moreland retained a considerable number of shares. Negotiations were opened with more than one financial magnate, both in England and in South Africa, and eventually the Company was upon the eve of establishment. It was then that the man Gastron reappeared upon the scene. He had heard of what had been discovered upon the Thorndyke estate, and he saw his chance. It was during the evening before the day when the terms of agreement between Rossitter, Moreland, and the capitalists of the new Company were to be ratified and legally entered into. A dinner was being held in a hotel at Cape Town, at which all the interested parties were assembled, when a note was brought to Moreland. It was the demand for an immediate interview between himself and Emile Gastron, and a very important interview it proved to be.

"It appears that both Gastron and his wife upon the night in question—when Thorndyke had gambled away his estate—had watched the players at their game. They had not only seen that the two sober men had deliberately set themselves to make their companion drunk, but they had observed Christopher Moreland slip something from a bottle into Thorndyke's tumbler, which had the effect of reducing him almost to a condition of torpor. So

much so, that when he had to sign the paper that admitted his liability, he was unable to hold a pen, and his hand was guided by Christopher Moreland himself. On the following morning Thorndyke's condition was a serious one, and he had to be driven in a cart to the nearest doctor's house, where he remained for some time, suffering from a complaint which nobody could understand. Now, gentlemen, the result of Gastron's evidence, which is supported not only by his wife, but backed up by the written report of the doctor who attended Thorndyke on that occasion, is such that, in a court of law, any jury would convict Rossitter and Moreland of having obtained possession of a valuable estate by criminal and unlawful means. These facts are clearly set down, though in fuller detail, here in the sworn statement I received this morning from the man Gastron."

Greatorex held up in his hand the letter he referred to, and then slowly sipped the tumbler of hot water beside him. There was a deep silence among the men round the table. Each face was turned with interest and expectancy towards the mild blue eyes of the speaker.

"It now became merely a question of blackmail upon the part of Gastron and his wife. The man offered terms to Moreland which, under the circumstances, appear to have been extremely moderate for a man in his position. They were that Moreland should take them into his service and provide generously for them during their lives, in addition to the immediate payment of a substantial cheque. Their terms were accepted, and Moreland returned

to the dinner party, having saved his fortune and that of Rossitter as well. Upon the following day the success of the new diamond mine was assured and the necessary capital subscribed. Moreland and Rossitter were rich men. Thorndyke was a pauper and lying in a hospital, not expected to live for more than a few hours, after an attempt at suicide. The Gastrons were sent over to England, where the man eventually became valet to Moreland and his wife was put in charge of this house in which we are now sitting.'

Greatorex drew towards him a packet of papers, which he carefully smoothed out upon the table with a ruler.

"That, gentlemen, is the first half of the story which deals with these tragedies. I now come to more recent events, with which you are familiar."

CHAPTER XXIX

WHEN Greatorex continued his narrative he dropped his voice almost to a whisper, though each word could be distinctly heard in the spacious room where he stood. He was fully conscious that he was now going to deal with the succession of mysteries which have been set down in the preceding pages, and he addressed his remarks exclusively to Clayton.

"You must please carefully follow the points which I am going to put before you. If any of the facts I state are inaccurate, I hope you will correct me."

He glanced at Clayton as he spoke, and his look was met with a sympathetic nod.

"The work of unravelling this mystery will be easier understood if I deal with the dual personality of Christopher Moreland as though it belonged to two separate people. You must, however, always bear in mind that, when I refer to the dwarf Harris I am also referring to the man who is now lying dead upstairs. I do not propose to enter into every particular of what happened in London and at this house, between you, Mr Clayton, and the dwarf, as the facts are already known to all of us. I shall only explain certain circumstances which at present appear inexplicable, but which are necessary for the elucidation of these crimes. The most

important portion of my remarks will deal with the discoveries made by Dr Fergusson and myself since I took the matter in hand.

"I learn from this diary that it was upon the evening of the 14th of last November when the first meeting took place between you and the dwarf Harris, outside Myles Rossitter's house in Berkeley Square."

Clayton nodded.

"During the morning of that day you had received a letter from Miss Rossitter asking you to call at a particular hour that night. This was obviously written at the dictation of her father. In fact, I understand the lady has admitted it. The reason for writing that letter was to ensure your absence from your chambers at a certain time. I have visited those chambers, and I have also interviewed the caretaker, Mrs Barrett. The result of my investigations points to two conclusions. In the first place, the rooms were undoubtedly suitable for the perpetration of a crime like murder. They were upon the third floor of the building. The tenant of the second floor was absent, and the ground floor was vacant. In the second place, the caretaker, who is very deaf, could not hear any struggle that might take place, and no one else was likely to be present in the house at that time of night. Now, in my interview with Mrs Barrett she distinctly affirmed that Christopher Moreland had been up to your rooms on the day before the murder, for she recognized him upon a subsequent occasion when you were with him yourself. She mentioned that fact to you, I think?"

"Yes," Clayton replied, as Greatorex paused for

an answer to his question. "I did not believe her, for there was no reason why Moreland should visit my rooms."

"Pardon me. There was a very important reason. He wished to obtain a wax impression of your keyhole, so as to have a key made which would admit Rossitter during your absence. While he thought you were with his daughter in Berkeley Square, Myles Rossitter took Thorndyke to your chambers—*and there he murdered him.*"

Clayton sprang forward with a cry.

"No—No! I do not believe it! Why should he do such a thing? My God—this cannot be true!"

"I will explain what was the position of affairs at that time," Greatorex continued evenly, and without undue haste. "The man, William Thorndyke, had suddenly turned up in London, when both Rossitter and Moreland were under the impression that he had died in the Cape Town hospital. He claimed that his property had been obtained from him by illegal means, and demanded compensation. It was necessary for the two men who had swindled him to come to terms. They did so, and the arrangement made was that Thorndyke should be given diamonds of a certain value, in exchange for a written statement, signed by him, that his property had been honestly bought. It was to effect this exchange that Rossitter got the man to your rooms that night. He carried the diamonds, and Thorndyke had his written statement. I do not believe that Rossitter actually intended to kill the man, but he safeguarded himself against any untoward event by not having the interview in his own house. It was safer that it

should take place in the rooms of another person, and you were the person chosen. By some mistake, which I cannot explain with certainty—(though several theories are plausible)—the diamonds were left in the cab which Rossitter used that evening, and, by a remarkable coincidence, you occupied the same cab afterwards, and found the parcel there.'

"It was outside Gatti's Restaurant in the Strand," Clayton said.

"So I gather from your diary. I presume the two men went there to fill up their time before continuing their journey to the Temple. On your return home, you found the murdered body of Thorndyke upon the floor, and almost immediately afterwards, you were joined by the dwarf. My opinion is that he did not expect to find Thorndyke there, and it is uncertain what was his object in following you, unless it was to try and find out the result of your conversation with Miss Rossitter, or to again impress upon you the desirability of becoming Moreland's secretary—or, in other words, *his own secretary.*"

Greatorex paused and wiped his spectacles.

"He then made you an offer of a private nature, upon the condition that you accepted his friendship, and carried out his instructions, did he not?"

A flush came to Clayton's face as he inclined his head in agreement.

"And you refused?"

"Most certainly."

"Good. You then left your rooms, and reported the matter to the police, having locked the dwarf in the apartment alone with the corpse. Upon your

return, with Dr Bransby and a constable, you found your chambers empty. Both the dwarf and the body had disappeared."

"That was so."

"You will pardon me for saying so, Mr Clayton, but in the entire absence of any proof of what you told the police, you will understand their very natural suspicion that the whole story was a fabrication, and that you were suffering from a delusion."

"But how could the dwarf take the body downstairs, and leave it in a room upon the ground floor?"

"In the first place, you must remember that the house was empty, save for Mrs Barrett who was deaf. Secondly, the dwarf must have had a duplicate key, similar to the one which he—(as Moreland)—obtained for Rossitter. Thirdly, you know—from your own experience with him in the drive here on Christmas Eve—that even in his disjointed state, he was an abnormally strong man. I believe he used his teeth to help him draw the body downstairs."

Clayton shuddered. He recalled the ghastly circumstances so well.

"But why did he make me that—that offer?" he asked.

"Because he had no intention of fulfilling it," Greatorex replied dryly. "Both Christopher Moreland and Rossitter were ambitious men, and equally unscrupulous. Each of them was playing his best trump card against the other at the time. Moreland wanted to marry the millionaire's only child. Rossitter would not consent to the union, except on condition that the dwarf ensured the death of Lord Orsett, in which case Moreland would succeed to the

title and estates. In this matter, Rossitter was entirely in the hands of Moreland, who is heir presumptive to his cousin, and, if Rossitter had looked elsewhere for a noble alliance for his daughter, Moreland would not have hesitated to disclose the whole of his plot, though taking care to shield himself."

Greatorex paused again to take another sip from the tumbler beside him. After a few moments he resumed his story, and the four men who listened to him marvelled at the wonderful logic of his arguments, as he proceeded to unfold and explain his version of the causes and effects of the problems that had baffled them all. Dr Fergusson was the only man among them who seemed entirely satisfied in his mind with the tangled skein of mystery which was being unwound before them.

"Why did the dwarf want me to murder Lord Orsett?" Clayton asked, breaking the silence.

"Because he intended to hand you over to the police afterwards, or murder you himself," Greatorex replied, as he placed his glass upon the table. "He would then have succeeded to the earldom, and hoped to win Miss Rossitter for his wife. Your services would have been no longer required. He was simply using you as a tool to further his own designs."

"May I ask for a little information upon one point?" It was M'Lean who put the question, and Greatorex nodded his consent.

"What I cannot understand is this—and I am sure my friend Mr Clayton feels the same. The whole of the facts you are setting before us are based upon the assumption that Christopher Moreland and the

dwarf Harris were one and the same man. Have you any proof that this was so, beyond the ghastly sight we saw in the library last night? I admit that Moreland was disjointed, but neither his face nor voice in any way resembled those of the dwarf."

"There is plenty of proof in support of every assertion I have made," Greatorex replied. "The alteration in the appearance of the face was simply a matter of clever 'make up,' which would not be detected in the dim lights or darkness in which he showed himself. Had anybody clutched at the hair upon his face it would have come out in handfuls, also the wig. The change in his voice was the natural effect, or result, of his altered physical condition, due to the respiratory organs, which suffered in consequence. Dr Fergusson was responsible for the idea of the identity between Moreland and the dwarf. As soon as that theory was proved possible, half of the mystery was explained, for the dual existence was established, as well as the motive for the crime. The certainty of that theory being correct was put beyond all doubt by no less a person than Miss Rossitter herself."

"By Verna!" Clayton exclaimed. "Impossible!"

"On that memorable night—the 14th of last November—when the young lady invited you to her father's house, she was unable to keep her appointment. Was any reason given?"

"Her maid informed me that she was ill," Clayton replied.

"Which was quite true. She had just gone through a very unpleasant experience, for she had surprised her father and Moreland that evening in

the library, and seen a sight she will never forget."

"What was that?"

"Moreland had been showing Rossitter how he deformed himself, and had not recovered his normal shape. Fortunately, neither of the men saw her, and she did not mention her discovery to them, but the shock to her nerves was so great that her health was affected for many days afterwards. She told me these facts herself yesterday, when I called upon her at Tunbridge Wells."

"Why did she not give this evidence at the inquest?" the Superintendent asked.

"She was too upset after her father's murder to attend—or give any evidence. Had she been well enough to be present, I doubt if she would have been called as a witness. The only persons whose evidence was considered to be of any value were these two gentlemen here, Mr Clayton, and Mr M'Lean. Then for the second time during Mr Clayton's connection with this mystery, his story of the dwarf was rejected as being too fantastic for belief."

"If the man Moreland desired the death of his cousin, Lord Orsett, why did he not kill him in the same way that Rossitter murdered Thorndyke?"

Again it was the Superintendent who put the question.

"Because, in my opinion, had he done so he could not have shifted the responsibility of the crime on to Mr Clayton."

"How was Thorndyke murdered?" M'Lean asked.

"By putting some of the dwarf's tabloids into the drink which he had at Gatti's Restaurant. Rossitter

could not have realized how potent they were, and gave him a dose which produced a more terrible effect than he intended. I believe he only wished to render Thorndyke unconscious, so as to obtain possession of his document, knowing by that time that he had lost the case of diamonds. He did not wish to kill him, but the result of his action produced those conditions in the corpse which the medical experts were unable to diagnose at the inquest, and can easily be recognized in the body upstairs."

"But how, and by whom were those diamonds extracted from the parcel I found in the cab and when were the imitation stones put in their place?" Clayton enquired. "That is what I cannot understand."

"The exchange was effected by Emile Gastron, who had an exact counterfeit of it in his possession, and knew perfectly well what negotiations were going on between his master, Myles Rossitter, and Thorndyke, and incidentally with yourself. You gave him a lucky opportunity, which he did not fail to avail himself of."

"When was that?"

"It was upon the occasion when he helped you off with your coat in the hall of Christopher Moreland's flat. He knew that you were going to call, and had had the duplicate parcel ready for some time. The imitation was perfect in every respect, even to the enclosure of Myles Rossitter's card. It was a clever trick, but not a difficult one for a man like Emile Gastron to play."

"You have not yet told us how Moreland managed to reduce his height by nearly two feet,"

M'Lean said, "as well as the other distortions of his shape. That seems to be the most uncanny part of the whole business."

Greatorex looked at a paper which had been pushed towards him by the doctor, and perused it for several moments before he answered.

"This is a statement which has been drawn up by Dr Fergusson, but it is so technical in its information that I only propose to give you an epitome of what it contains. You will have every opportunity of perusing it for yourselves later on, should you desire to do so." He took up the paper as he spoke. "It appears that, by reason of a malformation of the muscles and the tissues about his joints, which was accidental from birth, Christopher Moreland was able without difficulty or pain, to disjoint his limbs in a way that reduced his stature by about seventeen inches. Incredible as it may appear to the lay mind, this transformation from a man of normal size to that of a dwarf was as easy an action for him to perform as it is for me to raise my arm or move my legs. The doctor here, who has given all his professional life to the study of physiology, tells me that, though such a case as this has never to his knowledge been brought before the medical faculty, there is no reason why such a phenomenal condition of the human body should not happen. It is well known that some people can easily disjoint their thumbs. In the case of Christopher Moreland, he was able, with equal facility, to disjoint his hips, his knees, his ankles, and even his backbone. Dr Fergusson tabulates the individual reductions by dislocation approximately as follows :

Hips,	four inches.
Knees,	two inches.
Ankles,	two inches.
Backbone,	five inches.

General relaxation of muscles, four inches.

Total, seventeen inches.

"I understand that, by relaxing the muscles of the trunk and legs, anyone can in time shorten himself by three or four inches. But it was the dislocation of the backbone which was the strangest part of Moreland's power of deforming himself. The slipping down of the trunk between the hips, and the protrusion of the abdomen, intensified the unpleasant appearance of the man when transformed into a dwarf. Am I correct?"

Dr Fergusson nodded slowly in answer to the question, and looked blandly round the table.

"Are you of opinion that the man, Gastron, was aware of his master's peculiarity in this respect?" the Superintendent asked.

"I do not see how he could have been ignorant of it," Greatorex replied. "Gastron is a shrewd man, and would take care to acquaint himself as far as possible with everything which concerned his master's affairs. It must have been he who assisted the dwarf to carry Mr Clayton back to his room here, after the struggle in the drive. He was also probably an accomplice with his master in removing Thorndyke's body from Mr Clayton's chambers in the Temple to the ground floor. He must have been aware that Christopher Moreland was the same man who occupied the opposite flat in Acton Chambers."

"There can be no doubt that he was a partner in

his master's crimes," the doctor said gravely, " and he was probably very well paid for the job."

" But we have so far only discussed the means by which Moreland reduced his height," Greatorex went on. " We have yet to account for how he contracted the rest of his body. I was baffled by this problem during my first visit of investigation here, but my suspicions were at once aroused by that special room he built out of this house, and to which you, Mr Clayton, were unable to admit me. I examined it carefully from the outside, and noted the positions of the windows. There were two at each side, and one at the further end. By the simple process which, upon a previous occasion, had been adopted by Christopher Moreland himself, I obtained a wax impression of the keyhole, and got a duplicate key made in Ardley. Upon my second visit here, I used that key, and so obtained entrance to the room. There I found the two windows on either side of me, but no window at the further end. Again I took a wax impression of the keyhole." Greatorex waited impressively for several moments before he continued. Only the ticking of the clock upon the mantelpiece was heard, and a gust of wind driving the sleet against the window glass. " When eventually I entered that inner room, I was not alone. Dr Fergusson was with me, and from that moment the mystery was solved. The apartment was little larger than this table, and it was fitted up in much the same way as is a chemist's laboratory. The walls were lined with shelves, upon which were several bottles. In one corner was a sink, with hot and cold water laid on. Upon the table were a

couple of glass retorts, some crucibles, and a case of testing tubes. We put the bottles in the pockets of our coats, for they were fortunately small in size and convenient in shape. The drawer of the table was locked, but we forced it open, and found there a little leather box, which we also took away with us. That box was filled with white tabloids. As we were about to leave the room, I noticed a dark shadow against the wall. It was the upright framework of a door. That, gentlemen, was the most important discovery I had yet made, for it showed me at once the means by which the dwarf had escaped from Myles Rossitter's room on the occasion of the murder.

“The night after our return to Ardley, the doctor examined the contents of the bottles we had brought with us. He also tested the composition of those white tabloids with infinite care and patience. It was not till after midnight that he discovered they were made up of a certain medical preparation—rarely used in the eastern hemisphere and unknown in the west—which has the effect of drying up all the muscles and tissues in the body if taken in proper quantity. It was thus proved that after reducing his height to that of a dwarf, Moreland was able, by swallowing a couple of these tabloids, to bring the rest of his body—with the exception of his head and the framework of his chest—into almost a gelatinous condition, which could pass through a very small space indeed. His appearance must then have resembled that of a balloon in human form, which was almost emptied of gas. He was able to compress himself almost flat. Last

night when we examined him in the library here, we proved that our deductions were correct, for we dislocated his limbs *by force*. He had, however, already discovered that the game was up, and took his life by swallowing a sufficient number of tabloids to have killed half a dozen men."

An expression of triumph spread over the great ex-detective's face as he looked round the assembled company, and noted the keen interest with which his auditors were following his remarks.

"But how did the dwarf escape from Myles Rossitter's room?" Clayton asked in a hushed voice. "We followed him immediately after the shot was fired, and he certainly was not in the apartment when we searched it. Then the door was locked when we wanted to get out."

"I anticipated that question, and intended to answer it before it was asked," Greatorex replied. "It is the only detail of this extraordinary mystery which still requires explanation. On the occasion of my first examination of the bedrooms in this house, I noticed that the doors were all similar, with the exception of four. The rooms were those occupied by yourself, by Christopher Moreland, the one where the murder was committed, and that outside room to which I afterwards obtained entrance. When you told me what you had heard and seen on the night of the crime, and after very carefully examining the room where the murder took place, there was only one conclusion to come to. The shot must have been fired from a spot very near to the door, and the means of escape close at hand. I examined those four doors minutely, but they

gave me no hint of the secret they hid. It was not till I discovered that framework in Moreland's laboratory that the mystery was explained."

There was a breathless silence in the room. With irritating slowness Greatorex removed his spectacles from his face, replaced them in their case, and put it in his pocket.

"The deep frames of those doors were of deal, painted to resemble the rest of the oaken wood-work. They were not only hollow, but the interiors of them revolved. By pressing them upon a spot about half way up on the right hand side, a narrow aperture was revealed, and the opening of the door mechanically turned the hidden hiding-place. The dwarf shot at the bed as soon as he entered the room, and then immediately hid himself in the framework of the door. As you entered you revolved the narrow space in which the murderer was concealed. He merely stepped out upon the other side, and locked you into the chamber. As soon as he had recovered his normal condition—as Christopher Moreland—he coolly came and released you. Of course he thought he had killed his cousin, Lord Orsett, and did not know that the victim was his partner in crime—Myles Rossitter."

Greatorex turned dramatically and pointed to a distant corner of the room.

"There, gentlemen, is the framework of the door which the doctor and I found in the secret laboratory. If you will examine it yourselves, you will more easily understand the facts which I have been placing before you."

CHAPTER XXX

NEARLY a couple of years have passed since the events recorded in the preceding pages, and they have certainly been the happiest in Lawrence Clayton's life. As soon as possible after the second tragedy at The Nunnery, he had left the place with Lord Orsett (who had hastily returned there after hearing of his cousin's death), and together they had joined Lady Anna and Verna Rossitter in London.

By a strange sequence of circumstances already known to the reader, the huge fortune bequeathed by Myles Rossitter to Christopher Moreland had, upon the death of the latter, reverted to Lord Orsett, who, in the absence of any will, became possessed of the millionaire's wealth as the nearest relative of the deceased. Early in the following year he married one of the best known and most popular of London hostesses. As a widow, she was still the love of his early manhood, and the same lady of whom he had spoken to Clayton during the early days of their acquaintance at The Nunnery. In addition to her rank and beauty she possessed every charm which was requisite for presiding over the great social and political functions which took place in her husband's homes, both in London and in the country.

It was a sore trial to Lady Anna to be separated from her brother, but she accepted the new order of things with philosophic calm, and devoted herself more than ever to those philanthropic institutions with which she had so long been associated. She made her home in London, and Verna Rossitter was very thankful for the offer of her kind friend that she should consider it her own home as well. As Lord Orsett was able to make a very generous allowance to his sister out of his newly acquired wealth, her ladyship's house in Prince's Gate soon became one of the most popular centres of charitable activity.

After Lord Orsett's marriage, Clayton continued to act as his private secretary, and the salary he received was a most liberal one. A strong friendship had become formed between the two men, partly due to their mutual interests, and also to their association with the terrible events that had taken place at The Nunnery. Clayton also found that his former legal training stood him in good stead in dealing with many of the business transactions in connection with his employer's estates. During the autumn, a bye-election suddenly occurred in the midland county where Lord Orsett owned much property, and where he was justly regarded as a most popular landlord. His lordship insisted upon Clayton contesting the Division, and he supplied all the necessary expenses. When he was returned at the head of the poll with a substantial majority, Lord Orsett's delight was unbounded. He expressed his gratification in a princely form, and, upon the day when Lawrence Clayton first took his

seat in the House of Commons, he presented his secretary with a cheque for ten thousand pounds.

During the year which followed the death of her father, Verna Rossitter lived a very quiet life with Lady Anna Moreland. She met Clayton many times during those dreary months of mourning, though not as often as either of them could have wished. The girl did not go out into society, while a good deal of Clayton's time was spent over his secretarial work for Lord Orsett and, later on, with his own political duties. So it was not till nearly two years had passed, that the lovers found themselves together once again in a close and unrestrained companionship. Lady Anna had brought Verna to join Lord Orsett's party upon his yacht in the Mediterranean, and to avoid the London fogs of a severe winter. The brother and sister had long ago guessed the secret which Clayton and Verna believed to be known only to themselves, and they both highly approved of the match as being in every way suitable.

It was a perfect night, and *The Evening Primrose* was anchored in the exquisite Bay of Naples. Far away upon the dim horizon, where the blue of sky and water melted into each other, rose the faint outline of Capri, while upon the shore the lights were beginning to flicker from many a window. Downstairs, in the saloon, there was a party of bridge players lingering over their game, though the first gong had already sounded, summoning them to their cabins to prepare for dinner.

Upon deck, in the opaline glow of the dying day, walked two figures, and the only sound beside their voices was the soft splash of the ripples that played against the dark hulk of the boat.

Clayton felt for the hand of the woman beside him, and pressed it in his palm.

"Verna," he whispered. "You will marry me as soon as we get back to England? I cannot wait for you any longer."

She turned and looked at him, and her fingers tightened round his.

"Yes," she replied. "My life is yours now, and I will marry you as soon as we get home."

He drew her close to him.

"Dearest," he said. "You are giving everything, and I—nothing."

"You are giving me *yourself*."

"And have you forgotten all that terrible past?"

She shuddered.

"I shall remember nothing now—except that we belong to each other."

"God bless you, Verna," he whispered. Then he stooped, as she lifted her lips to his. "My God—how I love you, sweetheart!"

The sound of voices floated up from downstairs. The game of bridge was finished, and the players were hurrying to their cabins. Another warning gong boomed its note across the water.

And the still figures of a man and a woman stood in the half light upon deck, locked in each other's arms.

The sailor aft, whose business it was to keep a strict "look out," deserved promotion from that

moment. He had fulfilled his duty most conscientiously, but now he suddenly turned to gaze at nothing at all in the opposite direction.

Then he slowly winked at the rising moon, and spat overboard.

"Lucky devil," he muttered to himself. "I must tell my lass at home."

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Mrs. Cuthell's book will be especially welcome since the Baron, although a friend of the Emperor Frederick the Great, his father, and his sister, Margravine of Baireuth, and the Regent d'Orleans, has hitherto escaped biography.

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Earl Bathurst has in his possession a large quantity of Mary's letters, which he has allowed Miss Sandars to use, and the Duke of Portland's papers at Welbeck have also been placed at her disposal. The Earl of Orkney has kindly allowed the publishers to reproduce two portraits from his collection which have never previously been published. This book, therefore, ought to prove a highly important historical monograph, of something like permanent interest.

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Compiled by FRANK RUTTER, B.A., Curator of the Leeds Art Gallery, Art Critic of the *Sunday Times*, and author of "The Revolution in Art," etc. Richly illustrated, 5s. net.

This book provides a handy work of reference containing full information about European and American artists, from Giotto to the present day.

STANLEY PAUL'S NEW SIX SHILLING NOVELS

A Grey Life: A Romance of Bath. "RITA"

Author of "Peg the Rake," "My Lord Conceit," "Countess Daphne," "Grim Justice," etc.

"Rita" has chosen Bath as the setting for her new novel. She has disdained the "powder and patches" period, and given her characters the more modern interests of Bath's transition stage in the seventies and eighties. Her book deals with the struggles of an impoverished Irish family of three sisters, living at Bath, to whom comes an orphaned niece with the romantic name of Rosaleen Le Suir. "Rita" claims that an Irish adventurer, named Theophrastus O'Shaughnessy, who plays an important part in this book, is the male prototype of her own immortal "Peg the Rake."

Frivole.

KATE HORN

Author of "The White Owl," "Columbine at the Fair," etc.

After an excursion, in "Columbine at the Fair," into the realms of more serious fiction, Miss Kate Horn now returns to the early manner that won her so many admirers in "Edward and I and Mrs. Honeybun." The story bubbles over with light humour, and describes how Frivole Estcourt, daughter of Lord Gowan Estcourt, aspires to follow the standard of a social reformer, whose influence over her all but leads to marriage. It is a book underlain throughout by humorous situations.

The Horrible Man. FRANCES FORBES-ROBERTSON
(Mrs. HARROD). Author of "The Wanton," "The Potentate," etc.

This story deals with an old scholar who was supposed to be rich until sudden impoverishment put him in great distress for fear of the situation in which it left his wife and children. Retribution comes to the scoundrel who ruined him; but only after the loving daughter who avenges him has come through a romantic and psychologically sensational experience. The book is powerful and interesting. It will attract, especially those who enjoy a work of vivid imagination.

The Celebrity's Daughter. VIOLET HUNT
Author of "The Doll," "White Rose of Weary Leaf," etc.

"The Celebrity's Daughter," which, like Miss Violet Hunt's other novels, is founded on a much-entangled plot, only fully unravelled in the last chapter, is the autobiography of the daughter of a celebrity who has fallen on evil days. The book is told in the author's own inimitable style, with the humour, the smart dialogue, and the tingling life of her earlier novels.

Hunt the Slipper. OLIVER MADDOX HUEFFER (JANE WARDLE). Author of "The Artistic Temperament," "The Lord of Latimer Street," "Margery Pigeon," "Where Truth Lies," etc.

Those readers of Mr. Oliver Madox Hueffer's novels who remember his "Margorie Pigeon" and "The Artistic Temperament," will be charmed by this new novel from the same pen. It is the love story of a young Englishman of good family who goes to the United States in search of a fortune. The story is founded on an ingenious plot and set forth in an original manner.

Cheerful Craft.

R. ANDOM

Author of "We Three and Troddles," "Neighbours of Mine," etc. With 60 illustrations by Louis Gunnis.

There is nothing sombre or introspective about "Cheerful Craft," and those who agree with Mr. Balfour's view of the need of lighter and brighter books will find here something to please them, since broad humour and rollicking adventure characterise the story. A city clerk rises from obscurity to a position of wealth and dignity, and carries us with him all the way, condoning his rascality for the sake of his ready humour and cheery optimism. After all he is a merry rogue, and he works no great harm to anyone, and much good to himself, and incidentally to most of those with whom he comes in contact. This amusing story does credit to the writer's ingenuity without putting too great a strain on the credulity of the reader.

The Three Destinies.

J. A. T. LLOYD

Author of "The Lady of Kensington Gardens," "A Great Russian Realist," etc.

This story relates the adventures of three young girls and a boy of eighteen, who meet by chance before the statue of "The Three Fates" in the British Museum, and there attract the attention of an old professor who determines to bring them together again, and experiment with their young lives with the curiosity of a chemist experimenting with chemicals. The scene shifts in turn to Ireland, to Paris, Brittany, and Vienna, and the hero is always under the spell of that first chance meeting in front of the statue. One person after the other plays with his life, and again and again he and the others report themselves on New Year's Day to the old professor, who reads half mockingly the jumble of lives that he himself has produced, until in the end the hero realises that these young girls have become to him — *modern interpreters of the three ancient Destinies.*

Columbine at the Fair.

KATE HORN

Author of "Susan and The Duke," "The White Owl," etc.

Miss Kate Horn has here taken up an entirely new line. Leaving the style which made "Edward and I and Mrs. Honeybun" so successful, she here gives a critical study of a girl whose soul lies dormant until the touch of love and self sacrifice awakes it by the hand of a little child. Much success is expected for her new story.

The Unworthy Pact.

DOROTHEA GERARD

Author of "The City of Enticement," "Exotic Martha," etc.

The story of a young man, who, having inherited an estate from an uncle believed to have died intestate, finds a will which puts as a condition of his inheritance the renunciation of his faith. He hesitates to do this and hides the will for some years, suffering all the while from the knowledge of his misdeed. The events resultant from this secret are related with a true insight and with a sense of drama and of pathos.

The Honour of the Clintons. ARCHIBALD MARSHALL

Author of "Exton Manor," "The Mystery of Redmarsh Farm," "The Eldest Son," etc.

The Clintons of Kencote will be very familiar to the many readers of Mr. Marshall's well-known novels, "The Squire's Daughter," and "The Eldest Son." The central idea of "The Honour of the Clintons" is to show the Squire confronted with a serious problem, in which neither wealth nor position can help him. He is in danger of falling into the deepest disgrace, and has nothing but his sense of honour on which to rely. How he comes through the trial forms the main interest of the story; but it is also concerned with the love affairs of the Clinton twins, Joan and Nancy, now grown up into beautiful young women.

The Eyes of Alicia.

CHARLES E. PEARCE

Author of "The Amazing Duchess," "The Beloved Princess," "Polly Peachum," "Love Besieged," "Red Revenge," "A Star of the East," etc.

"The Eyes of Alicia" is the story of an impulsive, adventurous, handsome girl, brought up amid narrow surroundings and yearning for greater freedom. With the coming of womanhood she realizes her power of personal attraction and takes advantage of it in following her wayward impulses. The result is a catastrophe which shadows her whole life. The story is one of modern life in London, and while the scenes and characters have a vivid actuality, the mystery of Destiny hovers continually in the background.

Quadrille Court.

CECIL ADAIR

Author of "Francesca," "The Qualities of Mercy," "Cantacute Towers," "Gabriel's Garden," etc.

Quadrille Court, which has been the heritage of the Brabazons, becomes the property at length of Lady Virginia Brabazon, a widow and childless. Being on bad terms with Basil, her heir, Lady Virginia seeks solace in the companionship of two young Fitzalans, her kinsfolk, bringing them from South Carolina to Quadrille Court and seeking to play Providence to them. Meanwhile, the settlement of Quadrille Court hangs in the balance between Basil and the Fitzalans, brother and sister.

The Watered Garden.

MAUD STEPNEY RAWSON

Author of "The Enchanted Garden," "The Three Anarchists," etc.

An open-air romance, the principal action centring in the garden of a West Country Manor, standing upon a wooded estuary. It is the love story of Bettina Cole, the tragi-comedy—which is mostly comedy—of whose life carries with it a sense of the passion and charm of the country, like its successful fore-runner, "The Enchanted Garden"; it is a love tale, and also the story of a woman's development amidst the lives of her friends and her lovers.

The Strolling Saint.

RAFAEL SABATINI

Author of "Bardelys, the Magnificent," "The Lion's Skin," etc.

Mr. Sabatini lays before his readers in "The Strolling Saint" a startling and poignant human document of the Italian Renaissance. It is the autobiographical memoir of Augustine, Lord of Mondolfo, a man pre-natally vowed to the cloister by his over-devout mother. With merciless self-analysis are revealed Augustine's distaste for the life to which he was foredoomed, and his early efforts to break away from the path along which he is being forced. As a powerful historical novel "The Strolling Saint" deserves to take an important place, whilst for swiftness of action and intensity of romantic interest it stands alone.

The Poodle-Woman.

ANNESLEY KENEALY

Author of "Thus Saith Mrs. Grundy," etc.

Miss Annesley Kenealy's new novel, the first volume of the new "Votes for Women" Novel Series, deals with the feminine side of the great unrest of our time and endeavours to answer the question, "What do Women Want?" It is a charming love story, dealing mainly with two women, a man, and a mannikin. It present, feminism from an entirely fresh standpoint, and in a series of living pictures shows how the games of life and matrimony are played under rules which put all the best cards of the pack into men's hands. The heroine is an emotional Irish girl, with the reckless romance of the Celt and the chivalry of a woman, who remains sweet through very bitter experiences. The book is full of humour.

The Winds of God.

HAMILTON DRUMMOND

Author of "Sir Galahad of the Army," "Shoes of Gold," etc.

The heroine of this story, Captain Joan, to fulfil her father's wish, goes a-sailing to the South Seas to search for treasure. Her yeoman lover goes too, and others make up a party strong enough to go through villainy and mutiny, and although threatened by every kind of discomfort and disaster that a treasure hunt can bring, cheerful enough to follow out the adventure till it brings them success.

The story breathes an air of adventure and romance; it has the charm and quality of a fine outlook on life.

The Painted Lady.

ARABELLA KENEALY

Author of "The Irresistible Mrs. Ferrers," "The Woman-Hunter," etc.

Lady Germayne, long thought to have perished in the San Francisco earthquake leaves the smart, second-rate Californian set in which she has been brought up and comes to England to be mistress of Merlyn Castle. Charmingly pretty and self-willed, she is nevertheless quite incapable of coping with the difficulties of her new exalted state, and amusing *contretemps* arise leading at last to catastrophe. In the midst of wholly unexpected and mystifying happenings, enlightenment comes with happy love-scenes and a satisfactory climax.

Defiant Diana.

E. EVERETT-GREEN

Author of "The Price of Friendship," "Duckworth's Diamonds," etc.

On the death of their father, Diana Hurst and her four brothers are compelled to let the Hall and retire to the Manor Farm. Diana swears eternal hatred of the new occupant of their home and for long holds to her opposition. In the midst of some dangerous rioting at the Quarries in which Durham, the new squire, and the still defiant Diana are on opposing sides, Diana's pride is conquered.

Life's Last Gift.

LOUIS DE ROBERT

With a preface by Dr. F. A. HEDGCOCK. (The book for which a committee of Parisian ladies awarded the prize of £200 for the best French novel published in 1911.)

This "poignant and convincing narrative" tells of a young ambitious man who is overwhelmed by the dread of impending disaster. He struggles to free himself, but only becomes more deeply entrapped. In his misery and dread there comes as "Life's Last Gift" a romantic passion which cannot be requited but estranges him for a time from those most dear, and then leaves him to turn with a renewal of faith to the arms which he has shunned.

The beauty of this book lies in its absolute sincerity and truth. It speaks to all men and women who realise how great and terrible a possession is life.

Brave Brigands.

MAY WYNNE

Author of "The Red Fleur-de-Lys," "The Destiny of Claude," etc., etc.

At the time of the French Revolution, during the siege of Carpentras by the "Brave Brigands"—the soldiers of an Irishman named Patri—an attack is frustrated by the cleverness and courage of a young girl, who, in her adventures, mysteriously disappears. In quick succession there follow events concerning the plots and counter plots of aristocrats, papalists and revolutionaries, and amid adventures of love and war the story leads up to the famous "Glacier Massacres." It is thrilling and romantic from beginning to end.

Tainted Gold.

H. NOEL WILLIAMS

Author of "A Ten Pound Penalty," "Five Fair Sisters," etc.

Gerald Carthew, a young London Barrister, whose career has hitherto been quite uneventful, suddenly finds himself involved in circumstances which leave no room for doubt that a dastardly conspiracy has been formed against his life. For some time, however, all attempts to discover the instigators or their motive are unsuccessful; and it is not until Carthew's greatest friend has fallen a victim in his stead, and he himself has been nearly lured to destruction by a beautiful American girl who has been made the innocent decoy of the conspirators, that the truth is revealed. The story, the action of which is laid in England, New York and at the Riviera, contains some thrilling moments and a most unexpected dénouement.

The Lost Destiny.

G. VILLIERS STUART

"The Lost Destiny" is a novel showing the working of the 'unseen hand,' and telling the story of a man who shirked his destiny and was forced to watch the career of another who rose to heights of national fame, while he himself drifted like chaff before the wind. It is a striking novel, full of incident, and illustrating the relationship of life and destiny.

His Magnificence.

A. J. ANDERSON

Author of "The Romance of Fra Filippo Lippi," "The Romance of Sandro Botticelli," etc.

In this fascinating volume, Mr. A. J. Anderson gives a picture of the extraordinary personality of Lorenzo de Medici (Lorenzo the Magnificent) amid a strong setting of the love, fighting, plotting, assassinations, religion and paganism of the Italian Renaissance.

The Curse of the Nile.

DOUGLAS SLADEN

Author of "The Unholy Estate," "The Tragedy of the Pyramids," etc.

A novel dealing with the city of Khartum and the Egyptian Desert. Mr. Sladen is at his best when he is describing exciting scenes, and the book is full of them; but, like his other novels, it is also full of romance. It tells the story of a beautiful white woman who, being captured at the fall of Khartum, has to enter the harem of Wad-el-Nejumi, the bravest of all the generals of the Mahdi. When she is rescued on the fatal field of Toski, the question arises, Can the hero, an Englishman, marry her? Great figures stand forth in Mr. Sladen's pages—above all, the heroic Gordon in his last moments at Khartum.

The Memoirs of Mimosa. Edited by ANNE ELLIOT

The intimate and unflinching confession of a brilliant, erotic, and undisciplined woman, who resolves "to live every moment of her life," and succeeds in so doing at the cost of much suffering to herself and others. Her mixture of worldliness, sentiment, fancy, passion, and extraordinary *joie de vivre* make her a fascinating study of a type somewhat rare. At her death she bequeathed these Memoirs to the woman friend who edits them and presents them to the world. We get the woman's point of view in all matters—poetry, politics, sport, music, the stage, and, dominating all, the great problems of sex.

The Pit of Corruption.

WINIFRED GRAHAM

Author of "World without End," "The Love Story of a Mormon," etc.

An astounding story is Winifred Graham's latest work. It throbs with life, passionate and vivid, and yet deals with matters outside the realm of earthly existence altogether—matters beyond the thoughts of daily life and yet of startling importance to every man and every woman. It deals with the Pit of Corruption—the pit where a soul can work out its salvation both in this world and also in the great gulf beyond which shines the divine magnetic Light. The world-life and the spirit-life are sharply contrasted in the novel, and through all runs the story of a young girl's life, a story of overwhelming personal interest to every reader.

The Redeemer.

RENÉ BAZIN

Author of "The Children of Alsace," "The Nun," "Redemption," etc.

This is a moving and profoundly-powerful romance of village life in the Loire country. It is the love story of a beautiful young French school teacher and a worker in the neighbouring slate quarries, who are for a time separated by the man's previous inclination towards a woman living away from her husband. The development of the heroine, strongly held in check by her moral feelings, and the attitude of the hero to the woman to whom he is already united, are told with considerable insight, power and charm.

Cupid's Caterers.

WARD MUIR

Author of "The Amazing Mutes," "When we are Rich," etc.

Webbe Murdock, a dilettante wanderer, comes to London determined to earn a marrying income. After a struggle with journalism as a free-lance, he finds himself employed as "sub-editress" on a popular feminine weekly. The extraordinary nature of his work, in describing which the author turns a light on byways of Fleet Street where no novelist has trod before, and the peculiar class of literary larks and artists with whom he comes in contact, form the background of a novel full of strange revelations, into which are woven the threads of two very different love-affairs.

The Fruit of Indiscretion. SIR WILLIAM MAGNAY

Author of "The Long Hand," "Paul Burdon," etc.

A story of murder and mystery in which the interest is well sustained and the characters are convincing. On the eve of a country house wedding, the best man is killed on the hunting field. Captain Routham is asked to take his place, but suddenly disappears and his body is found on the railway track. With the help of Rolt, a famous detective, the mystery is gradually cleared up, and is brought at last to a startling dénouement.

The Return of Pierre. DONAL HAMILTON HAINES

With a frontispiece from a painting by Edouard Detaille.

Against the vivid background of the Franco-German War, there shines out, in this novel, the very human story of Pierre Lafitte, a French country lad. Other prominent figures in the story are the woman Pierre loves, her father—a fine old Colonel of Dragoons—and a German spy, not without attractive qualities, whose fate becomes entangled with theirs. The book abounds in striking situations, including the discovery and escape of the spy, the departure of the Dragoons for the war, the remorse of a French General who feels personally responsible for the men he has lost, a night in a hospital-tent, the last flicker of the defence of Paris, and the entry of the German troops. It is a remarkable book.

A Babe in Bohemia.

FRANK DANBY

Author of "The Heart of a Child," "Dr. Phillips," etc., etc. (11th edition).

Frank Danby, to gain information for this novel, joined the Salvation Army, went through their training home and Refuge at Clapton, and finally became attached to the dépôt of the so-called "Gutter, Slum and Garret Brigade," from which the work among the very poorest is carried out. This full-length novel, having been out of print, has now been practically re-written by the author, and although the thread of the story remains, every page has been extensively revised, and it will be found to be as good as anything recently done by this popular writer.

The She-Wolf.

MAXIME FORMONT

Author of "A Child of Chance," etc. Translated from the French by Elsie F. Buckley.

This is a powerful novel of the life and times of Cæsare Borgia, in which history and romance are mingled with a strong hand. The story is told of the abduction of Alva Colonna on the eve of her marriage with Propero Sarelli, when she is carried off to his palace at Rome and becomes his slave-mistress. The subsequent events, more or less following history or tradition, include the introduction of the dark woman of gipsy extraction, who enamours Cæsare, and poisons the wine by which the Colonna and her old lover Sarelli die. The story closes with a description of Cæsare's last days and death. This novel has passed through several editions in France.

The Price of Friendship.

E. EVERETT-GREEN

Author of "Clive Lorimer's Marriage," "Duckworth's Diamonds," "Galbraith of Wynyates," etc., etc.

Miss Everett-Green has had a remarkable output of novels in the past, but this one, her latest, is the longest—and strongest—standing to her name. It is the story of a man who impersonates his friend, from the very best of motives, and plunges himself into complications and dangers. Like all of this author's tales, it finishes with a startling climax.

Called to Judgment. CORALIE STANTON AND HEATH

HOSKEN. Authors of "The Muzzled Ox," "The Swelling of Jordan," etc.

One of the most thrilling stories of mystery, love and adventure which these popular collaborators have ever written. It is a vivid, human story, red-hot with incident and excitement, the central character being a man, who, after ten years' imprisonment for fraud, returns to the world with his past so effectively buried that he is known as a man of wealth, a Member of Parliament, and an Advocate for Prison Reform. The tale is said to be worthy of Poe or Gaboriau.

The Split Peas.

HEADON HILL

Author of "Troubled Waters," "A Rogue in Ambush," "The Thread of Proof," etc.

The interest of this story centres in the attempt of a socialistic, time-serving Cabinet Minister, aided and abetted by a mysterious foreigner, who poses as a Soho revolutionary but is in reality a spy, to undermine the loyalty of the British Army. His efforts are frustrated by a young officer of the Guards, with the assistance of two lively Eton boys. Mr. Headon Hill is himself an old Etonian, and he has put much local colour into his book.

Captain Hawks, Master Mariner. OSWALD KENDALL

Admirers of the novels of Mr. W. W. Jacobs should read this. It is a story of three men who cannot and will not abide dulness. Though separated superficially by discipline and convention, Captain Hawks, Grummet and "Cert'ly" Wilfred are brothers "under their skins," and are controlled by the same insatiable desire for variety. Their thirst for the unexpected is amply satisfied in the search for an illusive cargo of sealskins, purchased without having been seen by Captain Hawks. That the crew are nearly drowned, frozen, starved, and smothered, proves that they succeeded in a search for a life where things happen. A capital yarn.

A Star of the East: A Story of Delhi. CHARLES E.

PEARCE. Author of "The Amazing Duchess," "The Beloved Princess," "Love Besieged," "Red Revenge," etc.

This book completes the trilogy of Mr. Pearce's novels of the Indian Mutiny, of which "Love Besieged" and "Red Revenge" were the first and second. The scene is laid in Delhi, the city of all others where for the past hundred years the traditions of ancient dynasties and the barbaric splendours of the past have been slowly retreating before the ever-advancing influence of the West. The conflict of passions between Nara, the dancing girl, in whose veins runs the blood of Shah Jehan, the most famous of the Kings of Delhi, and Clare Stanhope, born and bred in English conventionality, never so pronounced as in the Fifties, is typical of the differences between the East and the West. The rivalry of love threads its way through a series of exciting incidents, culminating in the massacre and the memorable siege of Delhi.

A Gentlewoman of France.

RENÉ BOYLESVE

This novel, crowned by the Academy, has had a great vogue in France, twelve editions having been sold. It is the story of a provincial girl who makes a marriage of convenience with a man who sees in her the best qualities of wifehood and motherhood. The story shows how before great temptation she stands firm and emerges chastened but conquering.

In simple, direct fashion, the sweet and most admirable wife tells her story, and it rings extraordinarily true.

Gabriel's Garden.

CECIL ADAIR

Author of "The Dean's Daughter," "The Qualities of Mercy," "Cantacute Towers," "Francesca," etc.

When General Gascoign learns that his son Gabriel has cheated at cards, he turns him out of the house and leaves him to take refuge in a beautiful West Indian Island, which had once belonged to Gabriel's mother. There the young man struggles along the thorny road of a great renunciation and a supreme self-sacrifice from Darkness into Light. A charming story.

The Strength of the Hills. HALLIWELL SUTCLIFFE

Author of "A Benedick in Arcady," "Priscilla of the Good Intent," "Through Sorrow's Gates," etc.

In this novel Mr. Halliwell Sutcliffe returns to the Haworth Moorland which was the inspiration of all his earlier work; it deals with the strenuous life of the moors sixty years ago and will rank with his strongest and best works. Those who remember our author's "A Man of the Moors," "A Bachelor in Arcady," and "A Benedick in Arcady" will not hesitate to follow him anywhere across the moorlands in the direction of Arcadia.

Officer 666. BARTON W. CURRIE and AUGUSTIN MCUGH.

An uproarious piece of American wit which has already scored a great success at the Globe Theatre, London. It is from the pen of Mr. Augustin McHugh, who has associated himself with Mr. Barton W. Currie in producing it as a novel. Its dramatic success in England, as well as in America, has been phenomenal, and as a novel it will doubtless receive an equally warm welcome.

Devil's Brew.

MICHAEL W. KAYE

Author of "The Cardinal's Past," "A Robin Hood of France," etc.

Jack Armiston, awaking to the fact that life has other meaning than that given it by a fox-hunting squire, becomes acquainted with Henry Hunt, the socialist demagogue, but after many vicissitudes, during which he finds he has sacrificed friends and sweetheart to a worthless propaganda, he becomes instrumental in baulking the Cato Street Conspirators of their plot to murder the members of the Cabinet, and eventually regains his old standing—and Pamela. A spirited story.

Sir Galahad of the Army. HAMILTON DRUMMOND

Author of "Shoes of Gold," "The Justice of the King," "The Three Envelopes," etc.

A tale of the French retreat from Naples through a defile of the Apennines in the year 1495. The opening chapters relate the use made by certain restless spirits in both camps of a much-needed truce before the battle of Fornovo.

Thenceforward the development proceeds along unconventional lines, showing that the hero, Sir Galahad of the Army, carries out the associations of a nickname given in derision, and the grail is followed, though stumblingly and far off at times, through the incidents of war.

Brineta at Brighton.

GABRIELLE WODNIL

Author of "Maggie of Margate."

An amusing story of a young girl, the paid companion of Lady Bigne, who spends a holiday at a shabby, second-rate Brighton boarding-house, and falls into serious difficulties through masquerading as her employer. She enjoys the exhilaration of her fellow lodgers' respect, but soon meets trouble with a wealthy young man who is anxious to marry a Countess; and at the same time the extra expenses necessitated by her assumed grandeur set her farther into the mire of deception. The book, however, is very pleasantly brought to a happy ending, and throughout is decidedly amusing.

The Adventures of Mortimer Dixon. ALICIA RAMSEY.

Mortimer Dixon is a young journalist who is sent by his "chief" in a pursuit which takes him into startling adventures in the Chinese Quarter of the East End. This is a wholesome, breezy story of adventure, which leaves the reader with a sense of strong exhilaration.

Susan and the Duke.

KATE HORN

Author of "Edward and I and Mrs. Honeybun," "The White Owl," "The Lovelocks of Diana," etc.

Lord Christopher Fitzarden is the most delightful of young men, and adopts the old family servants destined for the almshouses by his elder brother, the cynical Duke of Cheadle. His love story runs at cross purposes, Kit being passionately in love with the beautiful but ambitious Rosalind, while he in turn is loved by Susan Ringford. Perhaps the most delightful part of the story describes a caravanning party in the New Forest, where Cupid haunts every glen. There are both fun and pathos in the tale, which should find many delighted readers.

The Irresistible Mrs. Ferrers. ARABELLA KENEALY

Author of "The Mating of Anthea," "The Woman-Hunter," etc. (6th edition).

The irresistible Mrs. Ferrers is a fashionable beauty, the idol of London society. Hostesses fight and plot to get her to their parties. The men of her world vie with one another for the privilege of driving her to Hurlingham. And yet no breath of scandal touches her. For her ambition is to be known to history as the most beautiful and brilliant woman of her day, who charmed all men and succumbed to none. But Lord Lygon, a clever and attractive man, estranged from his wife, lays siege to her, and the story turns upon the rivalry and struggle of the two women; of the wife who devotedly loves him, and of the other who, though fond of him, is loth to sacrifice her dazzling impeccability and to forego her unique position for his sake. There are some charming children in the book and some original views on the Woman's Question.

The Three Anarchists. MAUD STEPNEY RAWSON

Author of "A Lady of the Regency," "The Stairway of Honour," "The Enchanted Garden," etc. Third edition.

There are in this novel a delicate psychology, a true pathos, and a fine perception of the importance of the tiny incidents and minor happenings of daily life as they affect the human drama. The heroine is the unhappy young wife of an elderly, weak, cruel and penurious man, and the hero is a human stepson at inevitable enmity with so opposite a father. Both these characters have a craving for the fulness of life, the woman, with a noble perception of what is right, being intensely desirous of founding a real home and making real happiness; and the young man of warm flesh and blood responding to her pure woman's love and care with more than mere affection. There are fine and beautiful things in the book.

So it is with the Damsel.

NORA VYNNE

Author of "The Pieces of Silver," "The Priest's Marriage," etc.

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